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Book Review: *It Walks in Beauty: Selected Prose of
Chandler Davis*, Edited and with an Introduction by
Josh Lukin

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Synopsis

To paraphrase William Butler Yeats (with apologies), how can we know the edited from the editor?

It Walks in Beauty: Selected Prose of Chandler Davis.

Edited and with an Introduction by Josh Lukin, Aqueduct Press,
Heirloom Books, Seattle, WA 2010. (US\$21.00, 368 pages. ISBN:
9781933500379.)

How many mathematicians have an avid public with no particular interest in its hero's day job? Chandler Davis, poet, journal editor, science fiction writer, feminist, political activist (and mathematician), is one of those few. *It Walks In Beauty* is an anthology of his non-mathematical prose, selected and edited by an especially avid fan.

Chandler was born in Ithaca, New York, in 1926; he received his Ph.D. in mathematics from Harvard in 1950. He is known, among mathematicians, for his work in linear algebra and operator theory in Hilbert space, and in numerical analysis, geometry, and algebraic logic, and as co-editor of three volumes of essays (mathematical and more general): *The Geometric Vein*,

¹I am not a disinterested reviewer: I work closely with Chandler as co-editor-in-chief of *The Mathematical Intelligencer*, we have co-organized several creative writing workshops at BIRS in Banff, and we co-edited (with Jan Zwicky) an anthology of creative writing in mathematics and science, *The Shape of Content*. On the other hand this collaboration gives me a critical perspective.

The Coxeter Legacy and *The Shape of Content*. He is also known as a long-time supporter of the Humanistic Mathematics Network and co-Editor-in-Chief of *The Mathematical Intelligencer*.

Non-mathematicians know Chandler for his science fiction stories, published in *Astounding Science Fiction* from 1946 through 1962. These include *The Nightmare*, later the lead story in *A Treasury of Science Fiction*, edited by Groff Conklin; it argued for a national policy of decentralizing industry to evade nuclear attacks by terrorists. He also issued the fanzine “Blitherings” in the 1940s. Chandler is also a poet with two collections, “Having Come This Far” and “Held by the Word.” Last time I checked, Amazon.com credited him with three edited volumes – *Favorite Cheese Recipes*, *Bon Appetit Chocolate*, and *Spectacular Salads* – but on inquiry he disclaimed them.

And Chandler is also known, to mathematicians and non-mathematicians alike, as a principled activist, a hero of our time. Called before the House Unamerican Activities Committee in the 1950s, he refused to cooperate. The University of Michigan dismissed him and the United States government sentenced him to six months in Danbury prison. There, in his cell, he performed two miracles: he kept his mathematics research going, and he kept his sense of humor. These miracles were not disconnected, as one of his papers acknowledges: “Research supported in part by the Federal Prison System. Opinions expressed in this paper are the author’s and are not necessarily those of the Bureau of Prisons.”

In an essay in this volume, “‘Shooting Rats in a Barrel’: Did the Red Hunt win?”, Chandler looks back on that time and weighs its consequences. One spring afternoon in 1960, as he lay on his cell bunk listening to Pacifica Radio jazz, the program was interrupted for “their reporters’ tape of the mass demonstrations in San Francisco against the hearings of the House Committee on Unamerican Activities. ‘They’ll never be the same again,’ I said, and they never were . . . the Red Hunt had culminated.” Indeed, things would never be the same. “Make no mistake.” – he’s writing 35 years later – “Though you see the remnants of the former academic Left still, . . . we *are gone*. We did not survive as we were. Some of us saved our skins without betraying others or ourselves. But let me remind you – almost all of the targets either did crumple or were fired and blacklisted.”

Blacklisted from academia in the United States, Chandler accepted a position at the University of Toronto, where he is now Professor Emeritus. In 1991, the University of Michigan Senate initiated the annual Davis, Markert, Nickerson Lecture on Academic and Intellectual Freedom,” but the univer-

sity's Board of Regents has never apologized.

Josh Lukin, the editor of *It Walks in Beauty*, is an enthusiastic admirer of Chandler's science fiction, political courage, and feminism. (Aqueduct Press is a feminist press; *It Walks in Beauty* is its first publication of work by a male.) These enthusiasms have guided Lukin's selections. Thus the title story, "It Walks in Beauty," is a 1954 work of science fiction protesting the gender stereotyping of its time and place and, through its title, that of the past.² In the all-too-recognizable world it portrays, women must choose between life as a "dancer" on the one hand, and a career ("it-hood") on the other.

"It Walks in Beauty" is one of five science fiction stories that Lukin has selected from Chandler's oeuvre of about 20. I haven't read much science fiction, so I can't assess his writing by the norms and expectations of that field. Nor can I appraise Lukin's selection methods. It is clear, though, that both tasks are complex. For, though their settings vary widely, each of these five stories is a mix of protest, science fiction, and story-telling. On what basis should we judge them? As short stories, first and foremost? Or on their political content? Or for the plausibility of the strange new worlds they conjure? Or we might ask how successfully these three concerns are mixed. Is the mixing seamless? Is it effective – do they pull together?

However we might judge the stories on those grounds, they certainly succeed both as satire and prophecy. Half a century later, their themes still ring true. Or truer. Now more than ever, science is "Adrift at the Policy Level":

J. Albert Larue was nervous, but you couldn't blame him. It was his big day. He looked up for reassurance at the burly bass-voiced man sitting so stolidly next to him in the hissing subway car, and found what he sought.

There was plenty of reassurance in having a man like Calvin Boersma on your side.

Albert declared mildly but firmly: "One single thought is uppermost in my mind."

Boersma inclined his ear. "What?"

"Oxidase epsilon!" cried Albert.

²See Lord Byron's poem "She Walks in Beauty."

Cal Boersma clapped him on the shoulder and answered, like a fight manager rushing last-minute strategies to his boxer: “The one single thought that should be uppermost in your mind is selling oxidase epsilon. Nothing will be done unless the Corporation is sold on it . . .”

Humanistic mathematicians owe Lukin a debt of gratitude for bringing together in one volume important work of our colleague that we might not otherwise know about, or that is hard to find even in the internet age. The science fiction stories constitute the middle section, flanked on either side by Chandler’s non-fiction: letters and essays on the meaning and practice of dissent, the fate of dissidents, and the moral and ethical responsibilities of scientists and mathematicians. In “From an Exile”, Chandler makes the important distinction “between the ‘amateur dissenter’ who believes a heresy while making his living at an orthodox vocation, and the ‘professional dissenter’ who devotes his main intellectual effort to the heresy”, and urges universities to be worthy of the name by welcoming professional dissenters “even though some of them (one can’t tell except in hindsight which ones) will turn out not to have had anything of distinctive value to contribute.” In “Science for Good or Ill,” Chandler reminds us that at the height of the Vietnam war, “hundreds of mathematicians signed a statement that appeared as an ad in the *Notices of the American Mathematical Society* in 1967, right next to recruiting ads from Lockheed, Litton, the National Security Agency, and so on. The statement read: ‘**Mathematicians:** Job opportunities in war work are announced in the Notices, in the Society’s Employment Register, and elsewhere. We urge you to regard yourselves as responsible for the uses to which your talents are put. We believe this responsibility forbids putting mathematics in the service of this cruel war.’” I quoted from “Shooting Rats in a Barrel: Did the Red Hunt Win?” above. This essay alone, in my opinion, is worth the price of the book. Skillfully and gracefully, never bitterly, Chandler challenges us to think and rethink the Red Hunt: its origins, the practices, and lasting consequences: “as the agenda was cleansed our ‘our’ issues – economic justice and people’s control over the economy – the center shifted so far in the capitalist direction that certain ideas became almost unthinkable.”

It Walks in Beauty begins and ends with the editor’s introduction and afterword, and he comments throughout the book. His remarks provide helpful context, but they also presume more familiarity with the science

fiction of the '50s and with literary theory than I possess. I found the long interview, "Trying to Say Something True," especially frustrating: though always interesting, it rambles along for 58 pages without guideposts: names are dropped, but no one picks them up.

That interview is, I believe, the only place in the volume that Chandler's poetry is mentioned; that's okay, see the book's subtitle. But, though they pass the prose test, you will not find "Where did twentieth-century mathematics go wrong?," or "Our own Babel," or "Materialist Mathematics" here. That's not okay. Though Chandler is an eminent mathematician, a valued expositor of mathematics, and an acclaimed mathematics editor, the mathematical facets of his life are backgrounded. Of course, every anthology reflects the interests and tastes of its editor, and that is as it should be. Lukin is not a mathematician: he teaches writing, has edited an earlier anthology, *Invisible Suburbs: Recovering Protest Fiction in the 1950s United States*, and has published in the *New York Review of Science Fiction*. The choices are his to make. But mathematics illuminates Chandler's prose style (for example, his penchant for compactness). It inspires his poetry:

Q. E. D.

There are thickets and there are clearings
and when I can look around I may float aloft
and try to see from here to yonder
but sometimes can't.

In a thicket I grope wherever I can.
Once, thrashing through thorns,
I came across a manifold and tried
to engage it in conversation
it wasn't very communicative
it didn't even seem to know
its own name.

Flailing about, I stammered,
"Well at least you must have riemannian structure."
"Must I?" (It flickered as I looked.) "Why must I?"
"You must, because otherwise
I would be reduced to silence."³

And, possibly, it adds steel to his courage.

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In his “Afterword: Alternatives to Reverence,” Lukin states that “Hagiography is hard to avoid with a figure who combines a history of suffering with admirable artistic, scientific, and political accomplishment; but it’s a very risky approach to a person – not least because of the perils of disappointment. What happens when the idolized figure is wildly mistaken? A worshipper can become bitter and disillusioned for decades. But to find a more democratic way to appreciate a Chandler Davis, one might have to re-think what ‘mistaken’ means, or what constitutes a non-authoritative truth.” Lukin then addresses the questions of judgment I outlined above, but in lit-crit language.

I propose another, democratic, less theoretical, alternative to worship: a study of human complexity. *It Walks in Beauty* challenges the humanistic mathematician to ask what it doesn’t tell us: how do the many facets of this single if singular personality reflect, support, or conflict with one another? Chandler, though legendary, is alive and well and editing in Toronto. Exploring these questions with him would be an illuminating project. I also suggest poring over *The Mathematical Intelligencer*, the published journal and its archives. How does his personal stamp – clear expression, international outlook, light touch, scholarship without pedantry, intellectual delight, and profound humanism – emerge from of the endless, usually minor, debates, disagreements, and decisions an editor makes every day?