

Leslie Monsour. *Rhina Espaillat: A Critical Introduction*. Story Line Press (2013)
Reviewed by Alfred Nicol

Often, when Rhina Espaillat is invited to read her poetry, the person who introduces her begins by saying, “This poet needs no introduction.” Yet Leslie Monsour’s *Rhina Espaillat: A Critical Introduction* has much to offer the lucky reader who has just discovered Espaillat’s work as well as those of us who think we know her well. The first of the book’s five sections is an elegant meditation on her poetic achievement, pairing her “deep regard for craft” with her insistence that poetry must remain accessible, must communicate with the reader: “I’m after the meaningful ordinary... that everyone else can understand and that can serve as a bridge between my life and everyone else’s.”

Here and in the succinct biography which follows, Monsour’s intelligent, witty prose seemingly follows the play of thought, inviting the reader along on a leisurely stroll while calling attention to the high points of Espaillat’s poetic achievement and the major events of her life as she goes, as though happening upon these things by accident. We get all the pleasure of a tour without the aggravation of an itinerary. It is only after the fact that we notice how the arc of the narrative ends with Espaillat’s triumphant return to be honored in the country from which her parents were exiled.

The felicities of Monsour’s style are no less evident in the book’s third section, which includes close readings of several poems that hint at the riches to be found in her work as a whole. She cleverly displays a bit of that abundance by inserting a partial list of the urban and suburban animals Espaillat has written about: “Among Espaillat’s menagerie we meet a startled, ill-fated cockroach; an escaped terrarium crab; a rat nesting in an automobile engine; a bored zoo seal; a marauding woodchuck; and a camera-shy raccoon, keenly observed with the humane, philosophical involvement Burns gave his mouse...” A consideration of Espaillat’s frequently anthologized poem “Bilingual/*Bilingüe*” leads to an appreciation of her work in translation, and to this remarkable insight: “Espaillat’s naturally inclusive impulse to link diversities allows her to translate poetry with a facility she stores somewhere deeper and richer than intellect.”

Part IV of Monsour’s *Introduction* is a wide-ranging interview, in which Monsour’s astute questioning gives her subject an opportunity to expand on the themes discussed in these essays; that is to say, Rhina is invited to introduce herself. Monsour somehow prevails upon her to read a poem published in the November 1947 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, which Espaillat dismisses as a “sappy love poem” written at a time when she “didn’t know which end of a guy was up.”

And in the last section of the book, Espaillat speaks without interlocutor. We are presented with Espaillat’s poem, “Impasse: Glose.” Monsour’s graceful decision to step back and give her book’s subject the last word is of a piece with everything else she’s done so admirably in this book. *Rhina Espaillat: A Critical Introduction* is essential reading for anyone who loves poetry.