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98 Mansfield Street
New Haven, CT 06511
203 562 4215
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QM2 - Insights Squared

A discussion about museums and cultural nonprofits initiated by the QM2 community of consultants.

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Smiling with Brian Peterson

Review: The Smile at the Heart of Things...Essays and Live Stories
Brian Peterson

Despondent on a summer afternoon. In a day, I devoured Brian Peterson's lovely memoir on art and artists, life, love and marriage, work, museums, human strength, habits-of-mind, diminishment and death. Now nothing in the house is worth reading or watching or even doing, so ardent and tender and enduring are his stories.

This is the story of an artist - first a musician and composer, then photographer - taking on the cape of a museum curator and reconciling the positions over decades. If you work in an art museum, you understand very well why art historians, not artists, run them, and you know that Peterson faced a Herculean internal struggle.

Of course he had me at the first chapter *Thirty-five Steps*. This is the climb to his office in the James A. Michener Museum, www.michenerartmuseum.org, a climb my DNA knows. His office is in the room where I grew up, as oldest daughter of the old jail's last warden. The Michener Museum, its art and the many people who have made the stunning regional Bucks County museum, began life in a dank 1880s Richardsonian-type jail with 30' high walls and locked down visitation. In two pages Peterson describes the Sisyphean work of the curator, virtually guaranteed required reading for all aspirants to this lofty position.

Peterson apportions his thinking in five headings: Nourishment, Honesty, Beauty, Depth, and Hunger.

Under Honesty, Peterson brings us the title story *The Smile at the Heart of Things: Emmitt Gowin's Spiritual Journey*. It a story full of danger and love. Peterson shows us - really makes us see — the gift of a photograph of Gowin's wife and child, or any work of art that moves us. It's personal. First person. Subjective. He says:

Despite the fragmented nature of our lives; despite the reality of evil, violence, and death; despite the trials and horrors that life can heap upon our plates; despite all these things, Gowin's photographs tell me that spiritual and emotional health is not only possible, it may be as natural as breathing. [1]

In Depth, he brings us below the surface of the earth, mind and body of boy and man. We come to know his life-long relationship with his geologist father and the tender family moments at the end of life for his father-in-law. His boyhood friends appear and teach and so do his grandchildren. He brings us into his at-first unequal and then not, friendship with George Rochberg http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Rochberg .

Hunger, real hunger, is always fruitful.

He helps us understand the virtues of hunger in its many forms. Leaving us with:

Nothing good happens unless you're hungry^[2]

His final reflections are on the museum exhibition, the major production in any museum, which is *a ritualized form of nourishment in which an organized group of paintings, sculptures, photographs, etc....a body of work, is offered to the public in the hope that its aroma will be so tempting that it simply museum be tried.* A way of feeding our hunger.

One of the museum's patrons anonymously provided the funds to allow Peterson to write this book. This is the fruit of sophisticated philanthropy. Rare. Graceful. And with a work of lasting effect.

I've decided now that I've written this. I'm going to start at the beginning and read *The Smile at the Heart of Things* a second time.

Mary E. Case, former Director, Office of the Registrar, Smithsonian Institution; Founding Director, Qm2, a nationally prominent museum management consulting firm

Tell Me Press
Parenteau Guidance/Gail Parenteau – [Public Relations](#)
212.532.3934 – gail@parenteauguidance.com
www.tellmepress.com