Bruce Hunter
For _Canadian Poetries_ a review of

**Incarnate**
by Juleta Severson-Baker
Frontenac House Poetry, 2013
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Frontenac House just keeps producing winners. To name just one, Lisa Pasold’s _Any Bright Horse_ was shortlisted for the Governor General’s Award for poetry. Now, Micheline Maylor’s _Whirr & Click_ and Calgary-born Juleta Severnson-Baker’s _Incarnate_ are short-listed,
respectively for the League of Canadian Poet’s prestigious Pat Lowther Award and the Gerald Lampert Award.

*Incarnate* is an exceptionally accomplished book of poetry that is sensuous, intelligent and open-hearted. Never mind it’s a first book. It eschews mere cleverness and topicality for a more classical but entirely contemporary voice. And it’s sexy and fun. In interviews elsewhere and her epigraphs here, Severson-Baker notes her mentors: Robert Hass, Patrick Lane, Czeslaw Milosz and Sharon Olds. They hint at what *Incarnate* reaches for and achieves – poetry of a high order.
Severson-Baker’s poetry shares the world in so many ways. Her generous spirit makes this book unique and it’s why reviewers and readers have responded so positively. Severson-Baker’s musical language and dexterous rhythms move unselfconsciously from poems about her body, whether in childbirth or orgasm, to a lover’s body, to her children, to the mountains and to a river she ingests “as a snake takes a venomous toad.”

As a mother, she considers her young son, in the second-person “You Busy Yourself”: 
Then one evening your hand on your son’s hair –
the colour yours, the texture exactly between
your husband’s thickness and your wisps (memory of baby scent lips murmuring blessings at his sleepy cheeks) and you wonder who made this flesh? Who gave it? Once you’d have chanted god....(17)

Sverson-Baker moves from the physical and to the metaphysical and back, in these closing lines
Everything disappears. So for now busy yourself less. The body will grow itself away.
know your hand. Know his brow. (17)

Hers is a wise and confident voice.

There’s much more: from the light-hearted lyric, “Newly Wed in an Oilfield Town” and its lusty line, “all those pumpjacks/ pumping away.” to a compact prose poem “Cord” set in Bristol circa 1776 that tells of the ropemakers and how they love their women: “the pulse purple in candlelight of a tiny cord in her neck feeling it beneath his lips then that quick burst of freedom unroped undone before the
There’s much music in Severson-Baker’s poems: consonance, enjambment and sibilance. She shares with Sharon Olds, a rare ability to synthesise the heady and the tactile, in language and image, as she does in the stunning glosa, “Of”:

And the opening of the orgasm was black and black
and I was also in and of it....but it was not the black of death, it was the black of being born....” (13)

I think this describes the entire book: we are in it and of it. These are poems we live in and live through.
When I finished reading, I knew *Incarnate* was a winner. Then the reviews started to come, and there will be more. I’m still a hometown boy, and when I saw her name and her editor’s on the shortlists, I cheered. Something I’ve not been able to do for the Leafs in recent memory, alas.

Severson-Baker is someone I’d trust with my heart and my children. Hers is a wide-open heart and a fierce mind with a profound understanding of the world we share. Severson-Baker is a birth coach and a vocal teacher. Clearly, I’m not alone in my appreciation and trust of her gifts. How exhilarating to have
found her. Frontenac House is to be commended. Juleta Severson-Baker reminds us of all the joy that poetry can be.

Bruce Hunter bio:

Calgary-born, Bruce Hunter is a poet and fiction writer. His *Two O’clock Creek – Poems New and Selected* (reviewed in Freefall Volume XXIII Number 1) won the 2011 Acorn-Plantos People’s poetry award. His novel, *In the Bear’s House*, about a young deaf boy who finds love and redemption on historic Kootenay Plains, won the 2009
Canadian Rockies Award at the Banff Mountain Book Festival.