Bruce Hunter

For *Canadian Poetries* a review of

**The Grey Islands**
**by John Steffler**

The island floating ahead of us like a moon, tugging me
Forward. Whatever it has in store.

Leonard Quinton saying “the voices in those old homes” And
there it was, pulling and me already going its way. An island
of voices and ghosts. But voices and ghosts are everywhere.
And so begins John Steffler’s *The Grey Islands*. If you somehow missed the eighties and one of its great poetry books, do get this reissue by Brick Books as part of their Classics Series on the occasion of their 40th anniversary.

*The Grey Islands* endures as a virile, rugged and sensuous and comprehensive book in the manner of Michael Ondaatje’s *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, which Steffler acknowledges in his afterword along with the influence of Dennis Lee. Like the original this edition includes an updated introduction by Don Coles along with a new introduction by Adrian Fowler bringing a younger writer’s perspective to this historically significant book.
This is a feature of the Classics Series that includes other durable books by Anne Carson, Michael Crummy, Marilyn Dumont, Dennis Lee and Jan Zwicky. Even if you got the books the first time around, this series is worth a purchase for the new afterwords by the poets and the new introductions by younger poets. Paul Vermeersch on Dennis Lee’s *Riffs*, for example, is particularly insightful and helpful in placing *Riffs* for readers.

*The Grey Islands* is more than a portrait of the rugged Newfoundland landscape, it’s about the people: for one, Leonard Quinton, who looms large in Steffler’s narrative. The book was well-reviewed, so I’ll quote one of the many able reviewers Heather Craig in *Books in Canada*: “At times the narrative as
if we were given glimpses of the unmitigating ferocity of land and sea, of past lives and inhabitants – “their black skeleton houses” left as solitary reminders. At other times we were offered humour, absurdity, and a light-hearted vision of endurance and strength, body and spirit.”

Steffler’s fluency with language, physical and emotional landscape, and with social history give *The Grey Island* its staying power. This and the other Brick Classics are excellent additions to a personal or public library.