

Book Review

Title: *The Book of Goodbyes: Poems*

Author: Jillian Weise

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Reviewer: Johnson Cheu, PhD, Michigan State University

Poetry, at least in terms of mainstream America, has continuously had one charge leveled against it: “it’s not accessible enough” — not plainspoken enough — hence, in part, the overwhelming popularity of former U.S. Poet Laureates Ted Kooser (*Delights and Shadows*, 2004) or Billy Collins (*Aimless Love*, 2013). Disability, too, has long heralded a rallying cry of accessibility, from the move toward universal design and still-fought battles over accessible public transportation and housing. It’s unfair, perhaps, to critique Jillian Weise’s new book *The Book of Goodbyes* in terms of such a mantra, for, as my students often ask, “Who reads poetry anyway?” Even my local bookstore (the non-corporate one) has given up (sadly) having a poetry section altogether, that one tiny stand-alone bookcase given away to “things people will actually buy.”

Still, the reality is that, for poetry, Weise has hit the (relative) big time: *The Book of Goodbyes* being published by the well-known small press BOA, and also having won the Isabella Gardner Award for Poetry for 2013, “given to a poet in mid-career with a new book of exceptional merit.” (74). Given those particulars, it is relatively safe to assume that people, both disabled, and nondisabled readers of poetry, will pick this book up. Whether they will be expecting something along the lines of Billy Collins or someone who is so-called “accessible,” or not, is anyone’s guess, but what they will not get is a poet or poetry that is easy.

What is wonderful about Weise’s new book is her undaunting fearlessness. In the poem “Café Loop” she takes on critics who discuss her work (and her) as, in essence, not being disabled enough. She writes, “She actually is very/dishonest...Limps a little. I mean not/really noticeable....How can she write/like she’s writing for the whole group? It’s kind of disgusting./It’s kind of offensive...I heard she’s not that smart.” (l. 13-20, 32 pp. 15-16). What is tough here is that she does not defend herself or directly admonish these speakers who question her, her commitment, her intelligence. She simply lets the criticisms “loop” about in a deft poem. It is an ingenious response really, to respond to her detractors who question her intelligence with a crafted piece of verbiage.

Likewise, her poem “The Ugly Law,” about The Ugly Laws that forbade disabled, disfigured, “grotesque” people from being in public, that were on the books of many towns throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is (pardon the pun) a beautiful piece of work — a brilliant mix of the legal language and Weise’s own reflections. “I am not even unsightly. What a pretty face/I have I’ve been told....Is this all in the past?” (l. 65-67, p. 12). In this digital age, and beauty-obsessed, visual world we inhabit, an important question, not just for the status of disability, but for our media-driven and consumerist society at-large.

None of this may, in the end, be new to an audience familiar with disability and community history, issues, and politics, but it may be new to a wider poetry-reading audience. It is perhaps unfair that Weise, given the potential visibility of *The Book of Goodbyes*, will have to bear the burden of representation in this way. Many of the other poems in the volume are not quite as obvious in their disability-content (in poems about cut flowers, or the biting — in ways — “Poem for His Ex,” in which Weise asks, “Does it make you feel better/to know he cheated with a handicapped/girl?” (l. 25-27, p. 49). Some disability readers may want more overt disability-themed poems. Love and sex and the visual still loom large in the book as in her prior one, *The Amputee’s Guide To Sex* [Editor’s note: reviewed in *RDS*, 4(2), 2008]. But Weise is a poet more assured of her voice, her sense of poetic line (her enjambment is skilled and a thing for poets to marvel at). She is tougher. Her work is tougher. People may debate over how accessible the poems are or ought to be. There ought to be no debate, however, over how unflinchingly good this book is.

References

- Collins, B. (2013). *Aimless love: New and selected Poems*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Kooser, T. (2004). *Delight and shadows: Poems*. Port Townsend, WA: Copper Canyon Press.
- Schweik, S.M. (2010). *The Ugly Laws: Disability in public*. New York: New York University Press.
- Weise, J. (2007). *The amputee’s guide to sex*. Berkeley, CA. Soft Skull Press [now an imprint of Counterpoint LLC].

Johnson Cheu, Assistant Professor, is the editor of the scholarly collection: *Diversity in Disney Films* (McFarland, 2013) and served as the inaugural Fiction/Poetry editor for *Disability Studies Quarterly*. He has published poetry, essays, as well as scholarship in various journals and anthologies. He is on faculty in the Department of Writing, Rhetoric, and American Cultures at Michigan State University.