

# No Laughing Matter

**Sarah Kennedy**

**FAMOUS AMERICANS**

**Loren Goodman**  
Foreword by W.S. Merwin

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One always opens the latest Yale Series of Younger Poets collection with some anticipation, since the award, one of the oldest and most prestigious in American letters, promises the introduction not only of one of the best books of the year, but one of the best new poets. The choice of Loren Goodman will come as a surprise to many readers; his work is relatively unknown, and very few of the poems in his debut book have appeared in well-known journals. In fact, the book—sharp-witted and unreverential—might almost be described as a collection of antipoems, as Goodman takes to task many of the iconic figures and postures of contemporary America.

All three sections of *Famous Americans* experiment with form to the point that form itself becomes part of the book's subject. Part One, "Founding Fathers," even eschews titles (which are supplied in the table of contents) for the prose poems that make up a large part of this section. These pieces snake from subject to subject in a seemingly crazy free association that skewers American love for celebrity culture, TV religion, advertisements, and psychotherapy. Jesus morphs into Elvis—"This is Jesus as he appeared in the 1973 Aloha from Hawaii concert wearing his spectacular American Eagle jumpsuit"—and baseball players become our saints—"countless believers make pilgrimages to a grotto near Lourdes to pray to the immortal Babe Ruth." Cats get counseling—"As the first cat therapist, I have 'listened' to over 10,000 cats"—

and New York City gets a makeover—"It has been used by thousands of women with great success." Yeats is now "Yeast," the poet who "makes bread grow" in Ireland.

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Much of Goodman's technique depends on this sort of self-consciously slippery syntax and wordplay: puns, anaphora, phrase or word repetition ad absurdum, and lists. The biography, the interview, the schedule, and movie credits are all presented as poetic forms, and all ridicule some aspect of culture. "Who Would Win," which ends every line with the title question and three question marks, throws various fields of thought into the poetic pot, equating, finally, everything from "Norman Mailer vs. Norman Bates—who would win???" to "Dialectical Hegemony vs. Axiological Heterogeneity—who would win???" The TV promo seems to lie behind "Curb Victim," a short poem that highlights our obsession with such "hideous form[s] of suburban amusement" by promising that the "curb victim [will speak] out," then describing curbing in detail.

The conventions of a poetry collection are themselves a target for Goodman's satire; the last poem, titled "Index of First Lines," appears in the table of contents to be a scholarly apparatus. In fact, it's another poem, a list indeed, of first lines in alphabetical order (none of which, as might be expected, appear in the book). It's as if, right at the end, the poet includes himself and his writing in the jest, especially since the largest number of "first lines" appears under the "I's and most of those begin with the first-person pronoun, many more, even, than begin with "The."

But is this award-worthy writing? It is clear that experimentalism has moved to the center of the American poetic enterprise, that the investigation and play with form is no longer a challenge to the mainstream reader of poetry. It is also clear that the writing in *Famous Americans* is satire, that corrective observation of human social behavior dear throughout the ages to the urban sophisticate. Satire has usually found its form, however, in recognizable poetic, dramatic, or prose forms because its subject is usually some specifically delineated behavior—political corruption/tyranny, consumerism, excessive attention to personal appearance, just to name a few favorites. Satire, moreover, has usually fallen somewhere

along the old spectrum of Horatian (gentle, friendly, mild, hopeful) to Juvenalian (harsh, even cruel, pessimistic). Goodman, however, aims his satire at so many elements of American culture and the international poetry culture that the tone slides from friendly, even chummy, to sharp (he's thankfully never vicious); the focus blurs and we are looking through a cloudy lens at a world in which the very notion of "worthiness," even of "serious poetry," is also a joke.

W.S. Merwin, in his foreword, suggests that the book is less satire than "plain ridicule: the revelation of nonsense," and the milieu of Goodman's work is unmistakably ridiculous. But this "nonsense," while it has a broad range, aims to hit something. Merwin denies that the poetry has any "real bite or sting in it," but when the reader is told that to hear Gloria Vanderbilt "call is a rare privilege; to glimpse her in the wild, rarer still," and then is invited to "[h]old Gloria Vanderbilt in your hand...feel the cool touch of your deepest emotions," the poem has fired at our worship of celebrity, the commodification of that celebrity through "product lines" (clothing and perfume), and the replacement of genuine emotion with consumerist desire.

But all of that addresses one question of genre while dodging another. The prose poems will not

startle experienced readers, but even lovers of the avant-garde may feel frustrated at the three-word "The Party" ("Invite Don Rickles"), the two-line "The Beginning of an Amazing Novel" ("Thad, a three-hundred-pound man,/ did not even feel like moving. Big Thad."). These poems are toss-offs, as is the longer "High Waves Drifter," which, though it is funny, resolves into a series of cheap puns ("Doc Cousteau," "Billy the Squid," "Butch Bassy and the Sunfish Kid"). They're disappointing, low moments in the winner of such an important award, and one wishes the author had been encouraged to sharpen the book by cutting them.

On the other hand, humor is so infrequent in contemporary poetry that the ability to laugh at ourselves as we recognize our folly is a refreshing mode for examining the ways we replace thought with brain-dead TV and pseudo-news. *Famous Americans* may be guilty of sometimes side-stepping the problems of meaning and value by spinning into the ludicrous, but, often enough, the view it provides of our media culture, like all effective satire, is no laughing matter.

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