

# Fifty-Something Reality



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*REAL THINGS: AN ANTHOLOGY OF  
POPULAR CULTURE IN AMERICAN  
POETRY*

Edited by Jim Elledge and Susan Swartwout

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I'm a review editor. It's my job to go through stacks of new books, pick out the ones that look interesting, and match them with the right reviewers. I haven't had much time over the past two months, and the books have been piling up here. I also just finished editing a focus on anthologies, and the last thing I want to assign is another anthology. But I pick this book up anyway, read a few poems, set it aside to look at later. "Later," in this case meaning ten minutes later, I've already thought of two or three people who might have an interesting take on this. The only problem is, I can't put it down. Since I realize I probably won't find a reviewer who'll echo my thoughts, the only option left is to review it myself.

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## *Does Generation X care about any of this?*

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What do I know of pop culture? When it comes to painters, I think of Warhol, Lichtenstein, and maybe Keith Haring. I prefer foreign art films over *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park*. But then I notice most of the writers feel the same. The majority of these "real things" date from pre-Reagan America.

There are poems about Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, and Annette Funicello, but Maureen Seaton is the only writer who mentions Madonna—and she "scares me." Pamela Stewart's "Punk Pantoum" offers so little insight it could be based on newspaper articles. Yusef Komunyaaka's poem about Michael

Jackson begins: "I don't wish you were/ one of the Jackson Five/ tonight, only that you// were still inside yourself." Two poems are about mail-order catalogues, but nothing about e-commerce; as a matter of fact, there's nothing about the Internet. There's a take on *Psycho* and *Valley of the Dolls*, but no mention of *The X Files*. Does Generation X care about any of this? Do they watch Gilligan reruns? Do they remember a world before MTV?

As a baby boomer, I find these limitations part of the book's charm. It's simply important to keep everything in perspective, and approach this book on its own terms: pop culture, circa 1950-1980. Then again, if the icons presented here have survived the changes Americans went through during the past half-century, there's little doubt they will last. As the editors state in their introduction, the subjects of this anthology are "architectural relics for the poems and whoever reads them, even decades from now."

The introduction itself is more problematic. While it begins well, by the end of the second page it has deteriorated into a mumbo-jumbo better suited to a dissertation, quoting heavily from various sociological studies and doing little to integrate these quotations with the poems themselves. Also confusing is the fact that there's a table of contents, index of writers, index of titles, index of first lines, but no bio notes.

But skip the intro, skip the frontmatter and backmatter, and just read the poems. And skip over a poem or two if it's a subject that bores you. Along the way, you'll gain new insights into (and perhaps new respect for) Superman, American presidents, Vietnam, Coca-Cola, fairy tale figures, supermarkets, sports, hotels. (I feel like I'm listing the categories for *Jeopardy!*).

There are good poems and, if not bad, mediocre poems here. Many of my own favor-

ites are about TV: “Soap” by Jane Candia Coleman (about the one time she watched *Dallas*); Dorothy Barresi’s “When I Think about America Sometimes (I Think of Ralph Kramden),” about family violence and the way TV has embraced the changing public awareness; Gary Soto’s “TV in Black and White,” focusing on those families for whom, in the 1950s, television was an unaffordable luxury. The ending of Soto’s poem is especially stirring:

But if the electricity  
Fails, in this town,  
A storefront might  
Be smashed, sacks may find  
Hands, a whistle  
Point the way.  
And if someone steps out  
With a black and white TV,  
It’s because we love you Donna,  
We miss you Ozzie.

Other memorable poems include Baron Wormsler’s “Shoplifting,” nicely juxtaposed with Maura Stanton’s “Shoplifters”; Angela Jackson’s “Billie in Silk”; Jack Myers’s “Mom Did Marilyn, Dad Did Fred”; Kristy Nielsen’s “Self Portrait as Nancy Drew, Girl Sleuth”; and Kate Rushin’s “The Black Back-Ups.” As to other contributors, with 150 poems by 130 poets, it’s easier to say who’s left out than who’s collected here (the only conspicuous omission is Diane Wakoski, who’s turned pop culture into her trademark).

This volume could easily have become unwieldy, especially since it isn’t partitioned off. And yet it doesn’t. The narrative flow of the whole carries through over 300 pages, and the lasting impression depends on that totality, not on individual poems. And as a whole, it’s a delightful and important chronicle.

*Rochelle Ratner is Executive Editor of ABR. Her anthology, Bearing Life: Women’s Writings on Childlessness, was recently published by The Feminist Press.*



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