

Wilderness House Literary Review 12/2

Come To This by Jeff Weddle. Nixes Mate Books, 2017, 49 pages.

Review By Ed Meek



Bill Moyers is currently touting what he calls civic poetry by which he seems to mean, political poetry or poetry that comments on our situation now that we've elected a plutocrat (as Paxton points out in a recent essay in Harper's). That's right, we've elected someone whose priority is the accumulation of wealth and power for himself and his clan. It's true that right after the election I noticed people were quoting Yeats and Auden and looking for some way to explain what had happened. In addition to electing a narcissistic, sexist, racist xenophobe we had given the reigns of government to the Republican Party whose goal, it appears, is to dismantle the government of the people and to replace it with a government of, by, and for the rich. Such a state of affairs demands a response and one response for those of us who remain children of the enlightenment is to turn to art and poetry. But, it turns out that civic poetry is not so easy to write. If the emphasis shifts in art from style and invention to content and meaning, the aesthetic suffers. Moyers and organizations like Split This Rock may mean well but the poetry they promote is not always good.

Jeff Weddle enters this argument and walks a fine line between poetry that makes a statement artfully and poetry that sometimes lets us down with language that falls flat. When it works though, such poetry feels necessary and valuable. Take "See America First."

*I am sick like you're sick and I want to understand.
America, what have you done to us?
You are our pimp and pusher
and sainted church of Big Mac outrage
and sloganeered righteousness.*

Doesn't that remind you of Ginsberg? It's refreshing to read someone addressing the country as a whole in this era when we seem to be two separate nations as the great Andrew Hacker put it. Weddle goes on to say: "America, this isn't working out. /I think we should see other people, America."

There are a few strong poems about the country in this section. One is called "Of Course."

*parents love their children
and hard work pays off
and the man who bags
your groceries never
tortured a lost hitchhiker
in his basement
and buried what was left in his wall
after making a stew of her parts...*

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Later in the same poem:

*And no one you know
Goes to bed hungry...*

*And America is number one
And Jesus loves you
And voting matters...*

Right, voting matters when it is done by the Electoral College or by a minority of Americans in a majority of states.

Weddle is also able to be upbeat and whimsical in "This Cool, Green Hour."

*Days when air holds you
like an absent caress
and trees stand like answers
to unasked questions...*

*Days when the coffee
in your favorite cup
tastes like joy
and smells like laughter...*

Many of the poems are set up with a repeated refrain like "days when" or lines that begin with "you" or "this" and then the poet "free-associates" and expands on a theme. It's Whitmanesque although Weddle lacks Whitman's eloquence. Sometimes he'll just be too tendentious and direct. A poem about a neighbor who walks his impaired daughter to the bus each morning ends with these lines: "A great man, unknown./ Time for coffee."

Selling for the equivalent of two cups of Starbucks at \$9.95, Come to This is, nonetheless, well worth the price.