

Little Kisses, Lloyd Schwartz.
The University of Chicago Press.
73 pages. \$18.00.
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-45827-4.

By Ed Meek

LLOYD SCHWARTZ has become a cultural icon in the Boston area. Like Robert Pinsky, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Helen Vendler, his is a name you probably recognize. Part of the reason for this is that Lloyd Schwartz has a wide range. I first ran into his work in the 80s when he wrote about opera for the Boston Phoenix. He is a well-known Elizabeth Bishop scholar and he won a Pulitzer Prize for music criticism. He does a little acting. He teaches in the MFA Program at University of Massachusetts Harbor Campus, and he writes poetry.



In his new book of poems, Schwartz is often funny in a bittersweet way. His humor has a sadness and a sentimental undercurrent whether he is writing about a conversation with his mother who has Alzheimer's, or a close friend who disappeared, or a ring he can't find, or being mistaken for Jerry Garcia of The Grateful Dead in a parking lot in Somerville.

Some of these poems do not exactly read like poetry but rather like the hybrid form of prose and poetry that is showing up more and more these days (see Claudia Rankine for example). Other poems are tighter with rhyme and assonance and cadence. He uses some of his expertise in music here and there, and sometimes engages in a kind of playfulness as in "Howl." "How'll I learn my lines if there isn't any script? /How'll I find my shoes if I can't find my glasses?"

In a poem entitled "Crossword," he is both funny and clever.

*You're doing a crossword.
I'm working on a puzzle.
Do you love me enough?
What's the missing word?*

Yet, he can also be serious. In a poem about a missing friend, he concludes with these lines: "Our birthdays are looming. The older I get, the less and less/ I understand this world, /and the people in it." The ending is unexpected, yet as with all good endings, it rings true and hits the mark in this puzzling period we are living through.

Here he is describing an orchestra conductor:

*Breezing easily between exotic Chinoiserie
and hometown hoedown, whisking lightly between
woodwind delicacy and jazzy trombone...*

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*He's all dippy knees, flappy elbows, and floppy wrists...
He threw himself into the music—and very nearly into
the first violin section...*

Late one night in a parking lot in Somerville he sees two young men smoking marijuana. He is worried as he walks to his car. Then one of the two men tells him a silly joke and offers him a drag because he looks like Jerry Garcia: “long gray hair and a bushy gray (almost white) beard...” He laughs about the encounter all the way home.

My favorite, “Goldring,” is about losing a ring he’d worn for thirty years. He goes from obsessing about losing the ring to trying to find it to connecting it to other types of loss. Then he does what all writers do, he writes about it.

*Why should he lose it now?
He'd been having a run of bad luck.
A downward spiral...
His finger feels empty.
He feels empty and sad...
Another little hole in his life...
Endings, separations, partings—always leave him melancholy.
At a party he is always last to leave...*

Maybe he should write his own poem—the way other poets turn their losses/into poems.

When Schwartz comments on other writers turning loss into poetry, he is making fun of them but he is also being self-deprecating and poking fun at himself since he is doing that too.

In these poems what comes across in his poetry is a sense that Schwartz is both warm and likable and using poetry as a means of dealing with the world. Warmth and likability are not attributes one automatically assumes about poets and artists. In these difficult times, reading “Little Kisses” is reassuring. There may be Alzheimer’s, people may disappear from our lives, sometimes we lose objects we care about, but there is great music to be listened to, people can be nice, and there’s a lot of good poetry to read.