FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

67 Mixed Messages
Ed Allen
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In this volume, the author adds a new name to the catalogue of women immortalized in poetry. In response to Homer's Helen and Shakespeare's wired-haired mistress, Allen offers Suzi, a debt-riddled coed whose beauty elates and confuses the evidently homosexual speaker of these poems. "I love you, Suzi. If you read this, please / Grant me one night to learn why straight men care." Allen combines this traditional poetic subject—love—with its appropriate form—the sonnet. These sixty-seven poems are all Shakespearean sonnets, complete with correct rhyme scheme and iambic pentameter. Indeed, this undertaking seems to mock the idea of anxiety of influence, choosing instead to welcome comparison to its ancestral texts.

Although at times the form (specifically the rhyming) seems forced, in general the juxtaposition of the modern and the traditional emphasizes what the two realms have in common, such as admiration of the beautiful. K-Mart, John Mellencamp, and Coors Light appear alongside references to dragons, Boris Pasternak, and Ganymede. In some ways, these disparate worlds—the pedestrian and the literary—compete with each other in these poems, but they are held together by the speaker's obsession with Suzi and his refrain: "I love you, Suzi."

Despite the obsession-driven world that Allen creates, the real world creeps in, and swirling outside these love poems are a friend's illness, war, AIDS, and other twenty-first century concerns. No matter how much the speaker gets lost in fantasies about Suzi, he cannot escape his world, and it is apparent that even consummating his love for Suzi would solve no problems. In a poem titled "Thinking about Suzi on a Day When I Don't Have Any Desire For Her," the speaker repeats doctors' advice, that men "must pace themselves" and "eat oysters, liver, greens, / (And don't touch boys)," and concludes with the disheartening "Each man my age will sometimes need a break."

This collection is a log of failures, sixty-seven poems about an untouchable beloved—a surprising undercurrent from an author who has experienced much success of late. Allen's short story collection, *Ate It Anyway*, was awarded the 2003 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction, and his novel *Mustang Sally* became the 2005 Showtime movie *Easy Six*. He was also a

three-day contestant on *Jeopardy*, a show that makes a casual appearance in sonnet “14” of *67 Mixed Messages*. These are messages intended not only for Suzi and for Allen’s readers, but also for those looming figures of the literary canon. The messages are mixed, perhaps most importantly, because they are respectful of those ancestors but also defiant.

Erica Wright