

Poetry

A Mind Like This

Susan Blackwell Ramsey

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Too often, when contemporary poets employ humor, they do so at the expense of their art. The potential for sublimity and poetic revelation in language seems to be diminished by its inclusion. The poems end up feeling cheapened or even sophomoric. There are a few poets who have managed to circumvent this trap, and the latest, and one of the most successful, is Susan Blackwell Ramsey. One of the first poems in the book, “Tell Me If You’ve Heard This One,” is a wonderfully hilarious poem that takes on the concept of the joke itself, and how it is interpreted by the human mind, as its subject matter.

Overt examples of humor aside, Ramsey’s first book, *A Mind Like This*, brims with delight at life and language. As the title indicates, the mind is one of the chief concerns of most of the poems in the book—how it perceives its surroundings and, more importantly, how it perceives itself. One is reminded of recent work by Ron Padgett, in that the poet’s mind is constantly under scrutiny in these poems.

The book is divided into three parts, the first of which shares its title. Ramsey uses juxtapositions, sometimes jarring, to make these poems resonate. Emerson and Andrew Wyeth take their place in lines directly above and below references to the poet’s partner; Kalamazoo becomes anthropomorphized; and, in perhaps the most poignant and funny poem in the first part, the poet gets confused by the acoustic remake of Eric Clapton’s “Layla” when she meant to download the original, electric version. Her son explains her mistake to her, and all the while the poem cuts back and forth to a story about Brahms.

Sex and popular culture dominate the second part of the book—the poet ruminates on which “version” of Jimmy Stewart would make the best lover. Kalamazoo returns, this time observed by Pablo Neruda, and one of the poems is titled “How to Seduce Henry David Thoreau.” The third and final part, *Pattern and Ground*, shows Ramsey in a more sober light, documenting the deteriorating health of, presumably, a parent. Here, the language becomes

sparser, and the humor is used more sparingly, but to an even greater dramatic effect.

Ramsey's book jumps from strength to strength, shining in insight and formal execution. Many of the poems are free verse, but she throws in the occasional sonnet or pantoum to great effect. *A Mind Like This* covers so much ground with such unbridled enthusiasm at the joy of language and the mysteries of mind that only poetry can attempt to illuminate that, fifty-four poems later, the reader will be on the lookout for Ramsey's next book, and possibly scouring literary magazines for a more immediate fix.

Daniel Coffey