

The 6.5 Practices of Moderately Successful Poets: A Self-Help Memoir

Jeffrey Skinner

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If you have ever recoiled in horror at a handbill advertising a poetry reading, Jeffrey Skinner can likely sympathize. If, on the other hand, you've stumbled upon a poem or volume of poetry that shook your foundations and aroused a desire not just to take in more of the same but try to make your own, he's the guy whose book you want on your desk or in your messenger bag.

The 6.5 Practices of Moderately Successful Poets is a great aid and comfort to poets, poetry lovers, and those who seek to let a little hot air out of their discourse. It's also, as the title should make clear, very funny.

While there are stories from Skinner's life here—a quintessentially American upbringing in Levittown, New York, his work as a private investigator and security guard, and subsequent infection with the poetry bug—this book is unconventional by any measure of contemporary memoir. Short chapters include an imagined magazine Q and A titled “Dr. Frankenpoem Answers Your Questions,” a brutally funny “Save-Your-Time-&-Money” quiz to take before pursuing an MFA, and a periodic table of “Poetic Elements.” Even the wisest passages here are tempered with wit: “One can, it turns out, fashion stubbornness into the more useful and socially admired perseverance.”

Skinner offers sound instruction in the art of writing, suggestions for freewriting exercises, and thoughts on how to revise works in progress. The book is a bit of a tossed salad, but when Skinner talks about his own relationship to poetry, these seemingly fragmented elements cohere. “Reading [W.S.] Merwin, some new part of me woke up. There was the excitement of ideas I sometimes felt when reading psychology or philosophy, but in this case the excitement was pure, unmediated, in some realm beyond or above argument. It was of the body as much as the mind.”

Perhaps the most practical information here for artists of any stripe is a frank talk about finding time to work while most likely balancing a job and family responsibilities. He quotes Kathleen Ossip, who “bought and begged for four days away from my family” to do research crucial to a piece to describe the essential selfishness necessary to produce vital work. Readers who write will know the feeling, and to those who have not yet started: you've been warned. Life as a moderately successful poet isn't a likely path to fame or great financial rewards, but you do get to write poems. And that is enough.

HEATHER SEGCEL (Summer 2012)

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