



Clarion Review

Poetry

The Gist of Life Ain't What It Was Book 2

Robert Perdue

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Two Stars (out of Five)

The Gist of Life: Ain't What it Was Book 2, by octogenarian Robert Perdue, considers diverse topics, most of which center on the “days of yore” and “modern social blight” from a traditional, circumspect vantage.

Tinged with disenchantment as well as occasionally questionable attempts at humor, the collection includes poems on shifting values. Topics include the loss of nuclear families to “misconduct akin to the brutes;” mechanization of farming (“An Ode to John Deere”); and the commodification of bodies (“It’s for Sale”). Potentially controversial explorations include the aftermath of race integration in lines that vault from “Nobody cheers for Caucasians anymore” to disconcerting stereotypes of “Aliens from all over, both legal and not.” Perdue also weighs in on diminishing culture (“TV Fare is Slop”); lack of sportsmanship in contemporary football (“It’s the House of Beamer”); ineptitude among political leaders (“Tourism’s a Burden”); and related problems, many of which are not necessarily endemic to the present.

The poet, however, exhibits self-awareness, writing of men in their dotage, “They tend to dwell in yesteryear,” and “They can become defensive.” Despite this admission, the poems do not present renewed perspectives, compelling historical details to enliven the past, or surprising twists.

When not writing of broader changes in everyday American life or moral decline, Perdue—author of the earlier *The Gist of Life Ain't What it Was*—turns toward domestic problems, from changing a wax ring on a toilet to choosing a new coffee pot. He also gathers poems penned for specific events (“Prayer at Christmas,” “Festival,” and a poem on the birth of a great-grandson, among others) or for friends named in explanatory notes. Other poems, such as “Resurrection” and “The Message is God’s Promise,” provide simple reflections on tenets of Christian faith.

Without clear thematic transitions from one poem to the next or an order that allows the pieces to play against one another and accrue toward larger meanings, the book reads as an idiosyncratic, personal assemblage threaded by a preference for quatrains, AABB rhyme scheme, and familiar metaphors. “When the tides of life are ebbing,” for instance, is present in both “Dad’s Reply on Father’s Day” and “Hospice.”

Some readers may find the curmudgeonly persona relatable, though others may note more serious missteps, such as mentions of “corn rows,” “jungle demeanor,” and “welfare” in disparaging contexts. Moments with potential, including descriptions of dogwoods in the Blue Ridge mountains, are lost among poems that tend toward didactic conclusions.

Karen Rigby