

SUIPSALMS by John Edward Lawson Reading & Resource Guide

Introduction

SuiPsalms is the follow up to Lawson's acclaimed poetry collection, *The Troublesome Amputee*. Exploring the subject of suicide from all angles, this collection challenges pre-conceived notions and both poetry and suicide. Drawing on influences from Sylvia Plath to Ian Curtis this book is never quite what you expect.

About the Author

SuiPsalms came into existence after John Edward Lawson discovered there was not only something referred to as "suicide poetry," but it was being considered a legitimate genre of poetry. After reading as much of it as he could find he came to the conclusions that 1) almost all of it was very poor poetry, with some of the best examples still serving more as art therapy than stand-alone art, 2) a disturbingly high amount of it glorified suicide, and 3) it would not take much to compile what might be considered a definitive tome of "suicide poetry" to either provide an example of how it could be executed successfully, or perhaps even squash interest in this burgeoning genre, or both. Thus he took a break from publishing work in the fields that had garnered him previous award consideration and focused his efforts on constructing this book.

Things to Think about While Reading

With his first four collections the author became known for specializing in short verse--haiku and senryu in particular--and contemporary forms/free verse. Being that suicide is pandemic and unconstrained by any social or geographic boundary Lawson aimed to incorporate as many traditional poetry forms as possible. He also sought to push himself out of his length comfort zone by trying to find out just how long he could keep a poem going.

The initial manuscript presented to his editor was roughly twice the book's current length. It initially contained all manner of supplementary material covering the variety of forms used to facilitate the book's use in education, in addition to many more poems. The feeling was that books of poetry should be in the 100-150 page range so it was drastically reduced in size. A number of reviewers and readers have publicly noted they were only able to read Lawson's poetry in short sittings as the intensity rapidly became overwhelming. Does this feel like a complete book as you read it? Is the suggestion that these books should maintain a low page count misguided, hyperbole, or accurate?

"The Appalling Intricacies of Hexagons" was initially conceived as one of the author's first short stories back in late 2000, only to be completed a dozen years later in poetry

form. Does it read like a short story? Would it be better served as prose instead of verse, and would other entries in this collection show improvement as prose?

Discussion Questions

The opening page of the book contains three quotes. What is intended by the juxtaposition of these quotes? Do the quotes from *The Bible* serve any purpose, or are they filler?

The poem "First/Last Fumble" was accidentally merged with another poem in the process of book layout and design. Can you tell where one ends and the other begins? Each poem is a distinct form--can you recognize the forms and name them?

"The Appalling Intricacies of Hexagons" ends with a news article regarding the death of a Hana Miura. Who is she? The article claims she sacrificed herself rescuing a child from the path of an oncoming truck. Do the facts presented support this, or was something else happening with her and the child?

The book closes with a play on the "diarrhea rhymes" that unfortunately proliferate in our childhoods. Is this a nod to the fact that many of the issues leading to suicide stem from youth? Is the author attempting to say something about those who would seek their own death? Is it nothing more than an attempt to infuse the situation with some humor, and if so is this unwise or liberating? Does it in fact have something to do with statements made by the author earlier in the Author's Note section?

Information regarding both suicide prevention and "right to die" advocacy can be found in the rear of the book, and in place of a description the back cover instead contains information from the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline. Is the author playing both sides of the fence, or--based on the poems--does he have a distinct view on the subject of suicide?

Books/Films/ Media that Inspired the Author

The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath
Joy Division

Recommended Reading

Requiem For a Dream by Hubert Selby, Jr.
Surviver to Thriver Manual by ASCA