Evolution of a Blurb

Dan Coffey

Iowa State University, dcoffey@iastate.edu

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Abstract
In 1989, Tender Buttons Press published their first book, Bernadette Mayer’s Sonnets. There was no back-cover blurb or text of any sort, just a striking abstract image of blue on black. There was, however, a note by Mayer in the text at the end of the book, explaining how the collection of sonnets came to be. This note was cannibalized as a blurb for the 25th anniversary reprinting of the book (with extra material).

Disciplines
English Language and Literature | Library and Information Science | Poetry

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Evolution of a Blurb

by Dan Coffey on April 30, 2015

In 1989, Tender Buttons Press published their first book, Bernadette Mayer’s Sonnets. There was no back-cover blurb or text of any sort, just a striking abstract image of blue on black. There was, however, a note by Mayer in the text at the end of the book, explaining how the collection of sonnets came to be. This note was cannibalized as a blurb for the 25th anniversary reprinting of the book (with extra material).

Last year, Tender Buttons reissued the book. The colors are still a mixture of blue and black, but much more conducive to printing on the back cover than the original
would have been. So, self-blurbing, Mayer writes:

I looked through my past poems in the morning and discovered I’d been writing the always somehow peripheral sonnet all along without understanding the forms of brief conclusive thought the poems had been taking so often in 14 lines without me. How serious notorious and public a form, to think you could find the solution to a problem or an ending to an observation in one brief moment – a fraction of an abreaction or the science of the pattern of crumbs appearing on the table from the eating of a loaf of bread. Why are we as human beings so sturdy? How can we conscion existence much less love?

Actually, the new edition of Sonnets is packed with blurbs, in the final few pages of the book. Heavy names like John Ashbery, Ron Silliman, and Anne Waldman, among others, weigh in on the brilliance of Mayer’s work. Ashbery says that Mayer’s sonnets are “strong, dark and powerful,” and that they bring the form back from the “parlor-game” which it has become to its “strong beginnings” in the days of Shakespeare.

In mentioning “strong, dark and powerful” sonnets, Ashbery may well be referring to this couplet from “Sonnet: Kamikaze”: “If we cant (sic) get along then who the fuck can? / I will not run or go forward American, divine wind.”

Waldman has Mayer as a “genius” after whom “the love sonnet will never be the same.” She may have been referring to the closing lines of “Birthday Sonnet for Grace”: “Now more engrossed in hypnagogic literal mysteries of our age and ages I propose / To reiterate how I love you any time.”

And so 25 years takes us from a blurbless and rather hermetic first edition to a reprinting whose blurbs celebrate, from the author’s and admirers’ standpoint, the
legacy that the book has maintained in the world of poetry.
Dan Coffey

Dan Coffey hails from Buffalo, NY and has made the Midwest his second home. The librarian for English and World Literature at Iowa State University, Dan lives in Ames, Iowa, with his wife and son. He has had poems published or forthcoming in Poetry Bay, Kennesaw Review, MiPoesias, Dirt, and The Laurel Review.