

*About Now: Collected Poems*. By Joanne Kyger. Orono, Maine: National Poetry Foundation; 2007. Reviewed by Jonah Raskin, Professor, Sonoma State University, Rohnert Park, CA.

At 769 pages, Joanne Kyger's *About Now: Collected Poems*, is almost exactly the same length as Allen Ginsberg's *Collected Poems*, published more than two decades ago, and that includes work from 1947 to 1980. Kyger's hefty volume contains poetry from 1957 – the pivotal Beat year, of course, in which *On the Road* was published and that *Howl* went on trial for obscenity in San Francisco – to 2004, with recent, topical, and overtly political work like “Short Cuts to Iraq.” There's nothing in this volume as famous (or infamous as the case may be) as *Howl* or *Kaddish*, and, though it's unlikely that anyone, except the most devoted of fans would start at the beginning and read straight through to the end, barreling through more than 400 poems in one sitting, there are treasures all along the way in *About Now*, and ample evidence, if one wanted it, that Kyger has crafted a continuous body of inspirational and sensual poetry.

“Private writing is going to become public,” she observed in an interview with Nancy M. Grace that's included in *Breaking the Rule of Cool*. Kyger went on to say, “This is what Ginsberg was doing: taking down the wall between the private and the public. Once you did that you were out in the open.” You can see Kyger engaged, transparently, in precisely that kind of poetic endeavor in *About Now*, which she might have called “Taking Down the Wall,” or alternatively, “Out in the Open.” She's definitely out in the open here, and visible to all the world: cranky as well as beautiful.

The first poem – curiously untitled – begins with the word “mother,” and, as one might expect, there are poems about mothers, daughters and sisters. But clearly Kyger made a deliberate choice to write, too, about fathers and sons, and one encounters, in these pages, Achilles and Paris, along side Penelope and Helen, and poems written explicitly for men, like Jack Spicer and John Wieners. The masculine and the feminine – “Father Time” and “Mother Earth” – seem to co-exist, side by side in her cosmos. “I am married to the household gods,” she writes in a poem from the fall of 1972. “I aspire to be the consort of heaven...And the sky who is my father opens the world of the golden kingdom.”

From beginning to end, Kyger is a brilliant comedian; she's whimsical, playful, even about serious and reverential subjects like Buddhism and the dharma. Her poems are almost always fun and sometimes funny in a graceful way to look at on the printed page, whether they go for pages, or whether they're just two lines long like “Man get relaxed / Woman get permanent” or the poem entitled “Love” that reads “When people say they love me I tell them / Give me a loaf of bread – I loaf you.”

In her brief, but useful introduction, Linda Russo provides a biographical sketch of the author: Kyger's birth in Vallejo, California in 1934; her studies with Hugh Kenner at the University of California at Santa Barbara; arrival in San Francisco in 1957; and her life in Bolinas. Clearly, she's a Californian through and through, though she has, of course, traveled widely, to Japan, India and Mexico – a kind of dharma bum in her own right. Appropriately enough this beautiful produced book is typeset in Californian.

Where does she rank in the order of Beat poets? Very high indeed and, fortunately, we don't have to choose a single, favorite poet and ignore the rest of the tribe. We can have Ginsberg *and* Kyger, and Kyger *and* Di Prima *and* Snyder *and* Joanna

McClure and more. The circle gets bigger and bigger – more, not less inclusive, more global and more cosmic, just as Kyger herself would have it.