

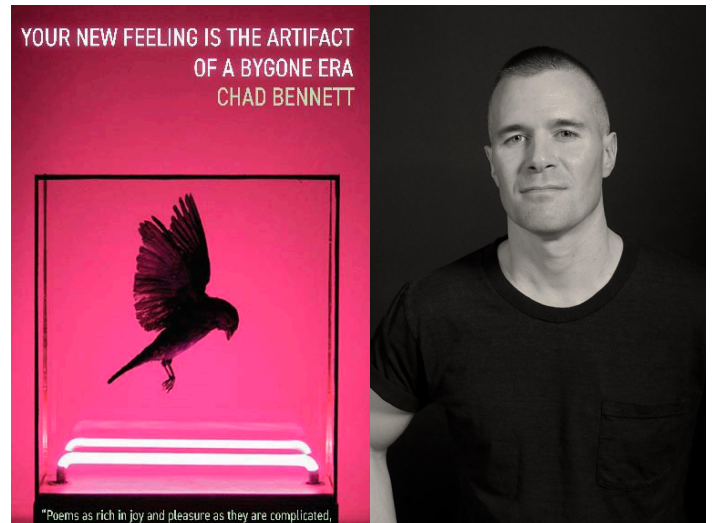


YOUR NEW FEELING IS THE ARTIFACT OF A BYGONE ERA

READER'S GUIDE CHAD BENNETT

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. A book's paratext, or all of the editorial and authorial material that surrounds the text of the work itself (for example, the book's cover, its title, dedication, epigraphs, notes, and so on) provides a frame for the book, helping to shape how we read and interpret it. Among its paratextual elements, my book begins with two epigraphs that I wanted the reader to pass by on their way into the space of the text: one from the theorist Roland Barthes and one from the writer Gertrude Stein. What ideas do these epigraphs present? How do they speak to each other? How do they help to shape your understanding of the book as a whole or of individual poems within it?
2. For me the book's title, *Your New Feeling Is the Artifact of a Bygone Era*, creates a dialogue between the present ("new") and the past ("a bygone era"), and between emotion ("feeling") and the cultural objects (or "artifact[s]") to which emotions are attached and through which they circulate. The title, written in the second person, insists that "your" emotional experience of your daily present is the effect of histories that might seem distant or even obsolete. Do you agree? Where do you see elements of this dialogue between the past and the present, artifacts and emotions, in the book's poems? What feelings, ideas, or effects arise from this dialogue?
3. The book's opening poem, "Idiorrhythmy," takes its title from the theorist Roland Barthes's



concept of "idiorrhythmy." For Barthes, the term names forms of being together that recognize individual rhythms of life and, rather than attempting to sync them up, respect these personal rhythms. Idiorrhythmy, according to Barthes, is the fantasy of living together, but according to each subject's own rhythm. How does this prefatory poem use the metaphor of the pendulum to explore Barthes's notion of idiorrhythmy? How do the poems that follow elaborate on this meditation on the tension between individual and communal rhythms of life?

4. I wrote a number of poems in this collection in an invented, collage-like form that I describe as "Ten discrete lines: four repeated." As this description frankly states, these poems consist of ten (roughly ten-syllable) discrete lines, with

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four of the lines repeated. I think of the resulting fourteen-line poems—see “How That Bird Sings,” “White Halls,” “Black Jacket,” and “George Dyer”—as variations on the sonnet form. What are the rhetorical or musical effects of this form, in and of itself? How do the individual poems written in this form handle it, and to what effects?

5. The poems “Andy Warhol,” “Gerhard Richter,” and “Alice B. Toklas” are what I think of as limited vocabulary poems, written within a particular set of constraints. These poems each take a quotation from the figure named in their title, begin with that brief quotation, and then elaborate a poem using only the words available in that quotation. The impetus behind this form was a desire to explore how the individual self emerges from—i.e., is made possible or constrained by—available histories. Within these poems, where do you think the historical figure’s voice ends and my own authorial voice begins? Where do these voices overlap? How can you (if you can) tell them apart, and what do you think is at stake in the distinction, or lack of distinction, between the two?
6. In the poem “Some Faggy Gestures,” I write that “The body is an archive. // The loss of even the slightest gesture is a withering of experience.” As you read the poem, think about how our everyday bodily movements and our comportment might present an archival record of our communities. What is at stake in the preservation or loss of this ephemeral archive? Why would this method of preservation and the history it records be particularly vital for queer communities?
7. I wrote the poem “How to Live Together” in part as a response to the poet Robert Frost’s well-known adage, “no tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.” What do you think Frost means by this statement? How do you think the poem responds to it?
8. “B L U E” meditates on the experience (my experience) of coming to recognize oneself as a gay person in small town America during the AIDS crisis, when, as the poem says, the only gay people one might know of were dying and often vilified: “THE NEWS OF THE MEN I WANTED TO BECOME CAME TO ME AS OBITUARIES.” How does this developmental experience complicate the poem’s sense of time and the speaker’s understanding of the relationship between the (imagined or actual) future, the lived present, and the recollected past? How do poems, especially this poem itself, provide a way to negotiate this experience?
9. Beginning with the title, *Your New Feeling Is the Artifact of a Bygone Era* often employs second-person address to an unspecified “you.” Think about how you understand who “you” is as you read: is it the poet addressing himself? Is it a specific person (or series of persons) being addressed? Is it you, the reader? Is it some combination of the above? What does saying “you” in a poem make possible, and how do the poems in this book play with those possibilities? Why?
10. A number of poems in *Your New Feeling Is the Artifact of a Bygone Era* take their inspiration from or refer to popular songs: “Poem Beginning and Ending with a Line by Morrissey” quotes the Smiths’ song “Handsome Devil”; “Femmes” riffs on a line, quoted in the epigraph, from the Violent Femmes’ song “I



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Held Her In My Arms”; “Little Thought Experiment” alludes to Patsy Cline’s “Then You’ll Know”; “Silver Springs” presents an extended meditation on Fleetwood Mac’s “Silver Springs”; “The Homosexual Tradition In American Poetry” consists entirely of lyrics from the Rolling Stones’ “Satisfaction”; the title of the poem “Caught In a Trap But Can’t Back Out Because I Love You Too Much Baby” is taken from Elvis Presley’s “Suspicious Minds”; and “Nights” builds itself around a lyric from the Frank Ocean song “Nights.” Choose one of these poems and listen to the song that informs it: what is the relationship between this particular poem and this particular song? Does the poem reflect, complicate, or challenge the song? Why? What do the book’s many references to popular music suggest about the relationship between poetry and song, or perhaps between individual expression and communal forms?

WRITING EXERCISES

1. A number of poems in this collection are written in a collage-like form described as “Ten discrete lines: four repeated.” As this description suggests, these poems consist of ten (roughly ten-syllable) discrete lines, with four of the lines repeated. The resulting fourteen-line poems might be seen as variations on the sonnet; their form suggests how one might make sustaining emotional artifacts out of the stray bits of language that surround us. See “How That Bird Sings,” “White Halls,” “Black Jacket,” and “George Dyer” for examples and then write (or collect from your notebook, previous drafts, or discarded poems) ten discrete lines of your own, thinking of the stray line as a unit of thought, feeling, and music. Once you have ten lines you like, arrange them into a new poem, repeating four of the lines for musical or emotional effect.
2. The poem “I Am Odious (as It Turns Out). I Am Monstrous Glad” responds to a writing exercise by the poet Bernadette Mayer, which is quoted in the poem’s epigraph. She writes: “make a work out of continuously saying, in a column or list, one sentence or line, over and over in different ways, until you get it ‘right.’” Write your own poem in response to this exercise, perhaps one which—like “I Am Odious (as It Turns Out). I Am Monstrous Glad”—both enacts and interrogates the exercise’s directive.
3. In the spirit of “Silver Springs,” try “to write a poem about, or like” a popular song that has been meaningful for you.
4. The poems “Andy Warhol,” “Gerhard Richter,” and “Alice B. Toklas” are limited vocabulary poems, written within a particular set of constraints. These poems each take a quotation from the figure named in the title, begin with that brief quotation, and then elaborate a poem using only the words available in the quotation. Write your own limited vocabulary poem: first, locate a brief quotation that speaks to you from a well-known figure. Then, write a poem that begins with that quotation and continues on, using only the words found in the quotation. As you write, think about where your historical figure’s voice ends and yours begins, where they might overlap, how you can tell them apart, and what might be at stake in that distinction. Incorporate that thinking into the poem if you’d like.