Jelly Roll by Kevin Young

Jelly Roll is the third volume of poetry published by Kevin Young, and it was a finalist for the 2003 National Book Award. The lyrics in this collection are what Young calls “blues-based love poems”—sonically rich, stylized evocations full of delicious surprises. The book celebrates African American music history as it conjures up field song, boogaloo, and jitterbug. Young expresses the real pain of heartbreak and hard times with wit, wordplay, and bemusement. This is a book that hurts so good.

Selected by the Poet Laureate of Grand Rapids and the Poet Laureate Committee.

About the Author: About the Author: Kevin Young’s writing has earned him many prestigious awards including the Patterson Poetry Prize, a Guggenheim grant, and the Greywolf Press Nonfiction Prize. His first book, Most Way Home, was a winner of the National Poetry Series. The New York Times has praised his poetry as “highly entertaining,” “often dazzling,” “compulsively readable.” He teaches creative writing at Emory University in Atlanta, where he curates the Raymond Danowski Poetry Library.

Questions for Discussion

1. Where and in what way do you hear music in these poems? How would you describe them?

2. Young uses the technique of enjambment, the continuation of a sentence from one line of poetry to the next rather than stopping the sentence at the end of the poetic line. How does this technique transform the reading experience of the poems in Jelly Roll? Any poem in particular where enjambment enhances the effect?

3. What do these poems say about love, longing, lament?

Three Poems that Deserve a Second Look

“Blues,” “Swing,” and “Deep Song”

More About Maurice Manning

An interview at Failbetter: http://www.failbetter.com/33/YoungInterview.php

From his author page at Blue Flower Arts: http://blueflowerarts.com/artist/kevin-young/
Rules of Thumb for Reading Poetry

Some people love poetry; some people are intimidated by it. In order for the reading of poems to be more accessible, less intimidating, here are some rules of thumb to keep in mind.

1. A poem is like a teabag; if you want the flavor you have to let it steep. That means we can take our time when we approach poetry. A good rule of thumb is to read a poem slowly, repeatedly, and meditatively.

2. Don’t worry if not all poems inspire you. Think of an art museum; you don’t necessarily stop and linger with every piece but only with the ones that make a connection. At first, you may not be able to articulate why a particular painting or sculpture holds your attention; it is only after spending time with it that you begin to put into words what it is that attracts you. So when reading a collection of poetry, focus on those poems that resonate with you.

3. Poetry is different from prose in that it does not necessarily deliver its message in a straightforward way and yet it is still expressive. By way of analogy, think of a symphony. When we listen to a symphony, we enjoy the music without necessarily knowing what it means. The same can be said of poetry. There are ways in which a poem speaks to us that are beyond the semantic sense, beyond what can be easily paraphrased. There may be, for example, a musical pattern to the poem that is more compelling than any interpretation, as in William Blake’s “The Tyger.” Tyger, tyger, burning bright,/ In the forests of the night;/ What immortal hand or eye,/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry? By reading a poem like this out loud, we can better appreciate the rhythm and rhymes that we might miss when we read it silently to ourselves.

4. Poems often communicate through images. Images, by evoking the senses, can make us feel things the poet wants us to feel. Often these can be quite complicated emotions. When Robert Burns says, “My love is like a red, red rose,” this is a very appealing image, and its meaning may appear to be obvious. But when we ask ourselves in what way his love is like a red, red rose, we begin to recognize the richness of the metaphor. We could think of the rose being very red and vibrant, just as love has a certain vitality to it. We could also consider the rose to be delicate or fragile, that even though it is for the moment suffused with color and fragrance these may not be very long lasting; is Burns suggesting that there’s a transience to love that is wonderful while one is in it but regrettably this love (all love) must fade? Burns may even be hinting that since roses have thorns love also can have a sharp edge to it that brings pain. So that in this simple image the poet may be conveying many meanings, wonderful meanings, at once.

5. Poetry is a performance where language plays. Poets play with words, their resemblances, their nuances. Poets want us to celebrate, as they do, the relationship of one word to another, one sound to another, as in “One fish, two fish, red fish, blue fish.” This phrasing from Dr. Seuss reminds us that maneuvers in a poem are not only clever and entertaining, they’re also very deliberate, so that we can enjoy the intelligence in the design of a poem, whether it be a child’s rhyme like this one or a more mature poetic expression. When we ask ourselves why a poet arranges her words in a specific way or what purpose she has in choosing the language she uses in her poem, we are opening ourselves up to the universe she has created.