

## **Talkin' 'bout his generation: A Review of Dominic Symes's *I Saw the Best Memes of My Generation***

*Bronwyn Lovell*

Reviewed: *I Saw the Best Memes of My Generation*, Dominic Symes, Recent Works Press

Dominic Symes is an Adelaidean writer and musician based in Melbourne. Symes's first full-length publication follows two chapbooks from local Adelaidean presses: *Minor Seconds* (Little Windows, 2018) and *NOW NOW* (Garron Publishing, 2018). Symes is that rare poet whose work is as enthusiastically received by the local pub scene as the academic literati. Symes started the monthly NO WAVE poetry readings at the Wheatsheaf Hotel in Thebarton and ran the series valiantly for five years, 2018 to 2022, despite periods spent overseas, interstate, and in Covid lockdown. Symes stepped into the breach with NO WAVE after local poetry icon Ken Bolton concluded his legendary Lee Marvin readings, a staple of the Adelaide literary scene from the 1990s right through to 2017. NO WAVE has become collectively beloved in a comparatively short time, developing its own idiosyncratic charm complete with food truck outside and flightpath overhead. It was at the final NO WAVE curated by Symes that he launched *I Saw the Best Memes of My Generation*, marking the end of an era and the beginning of a new one for him and the poetry punters. The NO WAVE regulars rallied around him, forming a trailing line for book signings that was positively rockstar.

The experimental cover art (Jean Bergeron's 'The empty bag', 2021) gives a hint of what we can expect in this collection. Bergeron's Etsy profile explains that he collects bits and pieces from each day, like notes and bills, and compiles them into a collage that acts like a visual diary. The cover image is a gathering of doodles, scribbles, found text, layers and colourful erasures. It is the kind of creation that celebrates its banality and announces itself as art, defiantly challenging traditional aesthetics. Bergeron's art, like Symes's wordplay, presents a palimpsest — an archaeological record of current times. The poetry within this unconventional cover is a lot like collage — a collection of curiosities. Moreover, Symes's verse is artfully placed on the page, such that the layout of the lines creates its own kind of visual art.

The transformative title of the collection is another insight into the philosophy and politics of this volume. By replacing the word 'minds' in Allen Ginsberg's iconic first line of 'Howl' with 'memes', Symes pokes fun at the cultural artefacts of his digital generation, while simultaneously connoting that the internet is a madness afflicting our contemporary consciousness. Removing 'minds' suggests a sense of mindlessness, and the addition of 'memes' suggests imitation and copying, a lack of authenticity. This rings true when one considers that so many poets must pimp their creative writing skills to make a living, churning out commercial copy for corporate websites and digital marketing campaigns. Like the period in which "Howl" was written, today's younger generations find themselves in a rapidly changing world, trying to find meaning amid a cacophony of viral messages. In this strange, vacuous cyberspace, there is an overwhelming sense of grasping for the non-tangible and non-permanent.

Symes adopts an irreverent, self-deprecating, confessional voice that may seem to dally on superficial points, but these casual observations are almost always tinged with an undercurrent of poignancy, suggesting there is something deep to be gleaned from the digital algorithms shaping so much of Gen Y's existence, such as an 'automated door' that will not acknowledge the author's presence, a miserly 'towel dispenser', or a message that has been seen but remains 'unread' (1, 33). Symes shares experiences unique to those who have grown up with social media and a digital footprint, such as staying 'up all night/ deleting statuses' made as a teenager that may make one unemployable as an adult (32). The internet infiltrates language: 'I had to IMDB it' (9). Like the worldwide web, snapshots of life, intimate and bizarre moments, the tired and the transcendent all collide in this eclectic collection.

The book feels human, frankly contradictory, and self-aware. It confronts colonialism and the patriarchy, while recognising its own privilege. Symes recalls his time at the University of Adelaide and its systematic sexism: 'I worked in an English department with only female lecturers/ & tutors while all the profs were male & getting paid more/ unsurprisingly when I taught Romantic literature it seemed/ all the texts were by male authors' (14). Symes calls out celebrity child abusers scrutinised in the #MeToo movement: 'rock remains as age appropriate/ as dating a 13 year old groupie/ (Jimmy Page)/ —in that sense/ rock and roll royalty/ is more Prince Andrew than Prince' (50). For this, the book is bold and significant.

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*I Saw the Best Memes of My Generation* is as silly as it is smart, as trivial as it is earnest, as tender as it is sharp, as comic as it is confronting, and as luminous as it is dark. An artful debut from one of Adelaide's local legends.

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### Works Cited

Symes, Dominic. *I Saw the Best Memes of My Generation*. Recent Works Press, 2022.