

Notes on *In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus One Day* by XJ Kennedy

Approximately three quarters of X. J. Kennedy's *In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus* is devoted to selected poems taken from nine of his earlier volumes of verse, and readers new to his work or those familiar with only a few poems have the opportunity to observe developments in style, themes, and form over a fifty-year span. Many of his best-known poems, such as "First Confession," "Nude Descending a Staircase," and "In a Prominent Bar in Secaucus," are included, but many readers will be pleased to find other "older" poems that are equally entertaining and provoking. For example, "The Blessing of the Bikes" from *The Lords of Misrule* (2002) provides a hilarious first-person account of a middle-aged biker receiving, along with Hell's Angels and "suburbans with high-boughten karma," blessings from the monsignor. The poem, derived from an Associated Press news item about such a ceremony conducted in the St. Daniel's Church parking lot, satirizes not only the bikers but also the Roman Catholic Church. Bikes are "old rugged crosses"; the blessing consists of "some magic in Latin"; and the speaker fears not since "the Virgin is perched on my handlebars." On a more somber note, "Aunt Rectita's Good Friday" provides a glimpse at the aunt's sense of injustice and her "bad" Good Friday.

For the most part, the selected poems are short or two pages only contain end rhymes, and use the four-stress line. Many are meditations of a sort, expressing the speaker's reaction to relationships, religion, poetic craft, and humankind's situation. Often they unfavorably compare the present to the past, and they contain allusions to the classical past, the Metaphysical poets, and the French poets. The overall tone is light, but somehow simultaneously somber, and Kennedy's noted wit, with its puns and slang, is always present.

Kennedy, a lapsed Catholic, often writes about religious subjects, but the poems are usually anticlerical and antiauthority. In addition to the poem about a priest blessing bikers, there is "First Confession," the first poem in the book, and one that sets the tone for many of the following poems. The speaker's hesitation is suggested by how he approaches, scuffing his feet with "Steps stubborn," the confessional, which is a "telltale booth," where the "robed repository of truth" awaits. The penance for his trivial sins, and his "sloth pride envy lechery," unpunctuated to suggest a rush of meaningless generalities to the boy, is "Seven Our Fathers and one Hail," which can be sped through in one minute or less. Although the Church has successfully indoctrinated the boy with his guilt and sense of damnation, the confession so trivializes the act that it is meaningless. In retrospect, the speaker states that he was as "full of grace as most," implying that most of the congregation had endured similar confessions. The last line comparing his tongue to a "fresh roost for the Holy Ghost" certainly diminishes Communion.

Belief or its absence is the subject of most of the religious poems. "Song: Great Chain of Being," alludes to Elizabethan times when the universe was ordered with God at the top. In the poem, Kennedy uses slang to delineate the place that everything once had: "man was top dog," "cut more ice," "cruddiest of sparrows." Then Nicolaus Copernicus and Galileo Galilei broke the chain, which is likened to a sprocket on a bicycle, and in the ensuing chaos things lost their connection: "the angleworm and the angel can't connect." God's throne, the "old arm chair," has been vacated, and the "Blessed Mother" does not seem to intercede for humankind. Now Medicare and the credit bureau are the overseers. Humankind is left dangling from what is left of the chain. The repeated "*Is seeing believing?*" raises the question of belief and science. For the speaker, the sense of "believing is seeing" is absent, but the poem is more a lament than celebration.