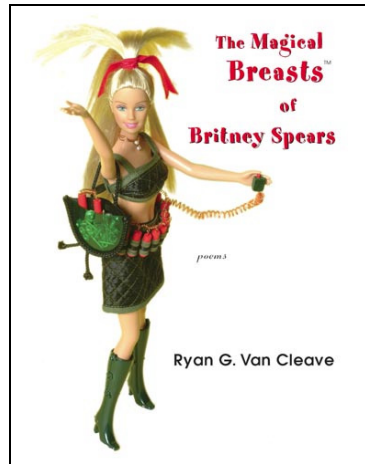


The Magical Breasts of Britney Spears by Ryan G. Van Cleave
General Book Information



**THE MAGICAL BREASTS
OF BRITNEY SPEARS**

Poetry by Ryan G. Van Cleave

ISBN: 1-59709-067-0

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Size: 7x9, 104 pages

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Praise for *The Magical Breasts of Britney Spears*

♦ By writing so unabashedly about the glitter, the effluvia, the very *Britney* of contemporary American life, Ryan Van Cleave may have shortened the shelf-life of these poems, but few readers of today will be able to resist his supercharged language and unbound satirical exuberance.

—**Billy Collins**, U.S. Poet Laureate 2001-2003

♦ Ryan Van Cleave's explosive riffs roll over the American pop culture landscape like a caffeined-up emcee from the dark side. Trying to keep up with his quick wit and dizzying leaps may leave you out of breath, but gasping with surprise and wonder, marveling at how—beneath the glitz—Van Cleave has found the sick, twisted soul of this country.

—**Jim Daniels**, author of *Show and Tell*

♦ Anger, hunger, and desire power Ryan Van Cleave's excitable new poems, but their rudeboy force is always harnessed by a larger comic vision. Whether he's channeling King Kong, Bubbles the Chimp, or Counter-Terrorist Barbie, Van Cleave alternately throttles and embraces our less-than-perfect world, turning its wild inconsistencies to his own ends. Never shying away from the facts on the ground, these poems, like Michael Jackson's tortured Bubbles, adamantly refuse to be denied.

—**Rachel Loden**, author of *Hotel Imperium*

♦ In *The Magical Breasts of Britney Spears*, Van Cleave makes unforgettable music. Tuned to the frequency of the moment, this book brilliantly articulates the paradoxes of the postmodern American landscape. Anxieties, elations, grievings—this book has it all.

—**Virgil Suárez**, author of *90 Miles: Selected and New Poems*

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The Author

Born in Wisconsin, Ryan G. Van Cleave was raised in the Chicago suburbs, and is a graduate of Florida State University's Ph.D. program. His poems and other writings have been included in magazines and journals nationwide, including *The Harvard Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The North American Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Shenandoah*, and *TriQuarterly*, as well as periodicals in Australia, England, France, India, Ireland, and New Zealand.

He teaches creative writing and American literature at Clemson University, where he lives with his wife and daughter. *The Magical Breasts of Britney Spears* is his fifth poetry collection. The author of a textbook on writing poetry, he is also the co-editor of five poetry anthologies, including *Like Thunder: Poets Respond to Violence in America*, which received the American Poetry Anthology Award.

Publications

- ◆ Poems in this book were first published in: *Barrow Street*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Cider Press Review*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *descant*, *Diagram*, *Diner*, *Eclipse*, *Fire (U.K.)*, *Floating Holiday*, *Grand Street*, *Harpur Palate*, *HazMat Review*, *The Homestead Review*, *The Lullwater Review*, *Maize*, *Ontario Review*, *Oregon East*, *RE:AL*, *River Oak Review*, *Southern Humanities Review*, and *Third Coast*.

Awards

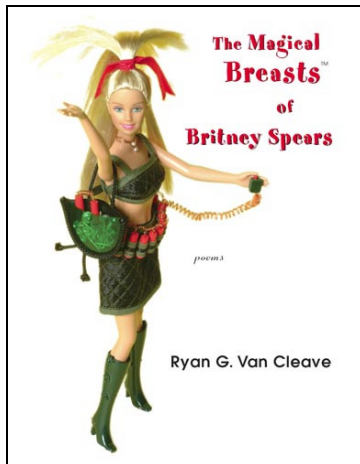
- ◆ "Blue Man Group & the Shiftiness of *Wu Wei*" won the 2002 *Harpur Palate* Milton Kessler Poetry Award.
- ◆ "I ♥ Tiger Woods" won 2nd prize in the 2002 *Diner* Poetry Contest.
- ◆ Selected poems from *The Magical Breasts of Britney Spears* were collected as *Bubbles Speaks* and won 2nd prize in the 2005 Main Street Rag Poetry Chapbook contest.

www.themagicalbreastsofbritneyspears.com

- ◆ Poem samples
- ◆ Audio clips
- ◆ Reading group discussion questions
- ◆ Ordering information

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Sample Interview



Why did you choose to write about Britney Spears?

Popular culture is ever-present in our lives; we are constantly bombarded by images and sounds that tell us what is cool, what (or who) is beautiful, and what we should value as important. We're so assaulted by these images that we scarcely stop to consider the influence that popular culture has on our ideas of who we are and our own relationship to the world around us. Britney, in particular, seems to represent the corrosive effect that popular culture can have when our lives are subject to the demands of the entertainment world. Also, many of today's poets choose to write in a manner that is not intended to communicate with a general audience. This book, however, invites and encourages readers from beyond the regular insular poetry community.

But what about her breasts? Why focus on that aspect of Britney's public image?

Partially this was due to the intense attention her breasts created by their apparent ability to grow and shrink on their own. There's even an animation video online entitled "The Mystery of Britney Spears' Breasts" that was (and still is) quite popular. There's something particularly disturbing about the demands we put on ourselves, our bodies, to access the world of beauty as prescribed by society. When a young woman goes to the lengths that Britney and others have, we should take note and try to decode what this sort of behavior means for ourselves, for our children, for the future of our society.

Britney's an icon of popular culture, like it or not. She has three times as many hate websites as does Saddam Hussein, and twice as many as George W. Bush. That says something to me. Sure, I could've written about Christina Aguilera or Paris Hilton or Michael Jackson or so many others, but something about Britney haunts me. There's a terrible sadness in her eyes, as if she woke up one morning and asked herself, "How the hell did I get here?" And now she's trying to implant meaning in her life through multiple marriages, having children at an early age, and exploring her sexuality in a very public format. She's lost and it's as much our fault as hers.

So your poetry collection isn't a "bash Britney" book?

Not at all. Sure, it uses satire and humor to get at some core societal and cultural issues, as does *The Simpsons*, *The Family Guy*, and *Saturday Night Live*. Some of these poems have fun with the idea of public/private lives and the American star system which plays off our hopes that *The Great Gatsby* and *Death of Salesman* were wrong, that the American Dream does exist and you too can have your own Horatio Alger rags to riches story. Reality TV—one of the most manufactured and contrived things on TV—does this, too. Consider *Joe Millionaire*, or even more poignantly, *American Idol*. Only three or four of the contestants have real star power, and it's so obvious in these few that each

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Sample Interview (continued)

would likely have been discovered on their own. The other eighty thousand contestants are having their spirit broken in a crushing realization that for them, America is not the land of dreams. And ten million of us get to watch them cry as we point and laugh.

The book is more than just Britney poems. Lord knows there are plenty enough pop culture icons and images to give voice to or take issue with. King Kong, Michael Jackson's chimpanzee Bubbles, Monica Lewinsky, Barbie, Ben Stein, Macaulay Culkin, The Muppets, Simon Cowell, Tiger Woods, Mike Tyson, Captain Kirk, Yanni, Bert and Ernie. It's my contention that some of the most pervasive and complex issues of our postmodern world are best examined through the lens of popular culture.

Name some other texts that are doing the same sort of things with popular culture that you're doing in *The Magical Breasts of Britney Spears*.

Don DeLillo's *White Noise*. The movie *American Beauty*. David Sedaris' *Me Talk Pretty One Day*. Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh*. Neil Postman's *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*. Plus the poetry of Albert Goldbarth, Denise Duhamel, Ai, Jeannine Hall Gailey, Charles Harper Webb, Jeffrey McDaniel, and Billy Collins, to name just a few. I'm not the first writer to use poetry as a vehicle to explore popular culture, and I surely won't be the last.

Would it be fair to say that you see popular culture as a negative thing?

Not in the least. I grew up with Dungeons & Dragons, Sunday morning cartoons, *Star Wars*, G.I. Joe figures, big-hair 80s bands, Smurfs, the McRib, Rubik's Cubes, and parachute pants. Even today I watch *American Idol* and *Dancing with the Stars*. I carry an iPod, a cell phone with camera function and Internet capability, and a portable Playstation unit. People who claim they don't own a TV come off as boasting that they don't cater to the low-culture mob that America has become. I love popular culture. Taken passively and without critical attention, popular culture can be a destructive force. But to actively and intellectually engage with pop culture demands a high level of analytical thinking—it also helps us understand the forces that are helping shape America's future. Consider books such as *Everything Bad Is Good for You: How Today's Popular Culture Is Actually Making Us Smarter* by Stephen Johnson, which claim pop culture is a very positive force. Maybe listening to "Oops! . . . I Did It Again" might not make us smarter, but asking ourselves what explicit or implicit messages are incorporated into the delivery of that cotton-candy song might.

What do you want people to take away from reading these poems?

Like the work of Billy Collins, I hope readers find these poems accessible and memorable. Humor might help make that happen, as might the subdued formal elements in them that emerge from my lifelong love of John Keats, T. S. Eliot, and W. H. Auden. Poetry is indeed a cultural force, but a poem that doesn't evoke emotion and please a reader through vivid imagery and the beauty of language simply is not going to last.

Perhaps Edward Hirsch says it best in his bestselling book *How to Read a Poem and Fall In Love With Poetry*: "Poetry puts us on a hook—it makes us responsible for what we might otherwise evade in ourselves and in others. It gives us greater access to ourselves." Much of the reason I'm an educator—I teach creative writing and American literature at Clemson University—is to help young people reexamine the world they live in and reevaluate their relationship to it. If my poems provoke some of the same reactions in a reader, I'll consider the book a resounding success.

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Media

Ryan G. Van Cleave is available for interviews, discussions, class visits, workshop groups, and conferences. Please contact the publicity coordinator if you are interested in reaching the author.

For information on

- Author photographs
- Cover art
- Excerpts
- Events
- Advertising

Lata Pandya
Publicity Coordinator
lata@redhen.org

Kara Lawton
Marketing Coordinator
sales@redhen.org

Telephone 818.831.0649
Fax 818.831.6659

For book availability and ordering:

- **Red Hen Press**
P.O. Box 3537
Grenada Hills, CA 91394
Telephone 818.831.0649
Fax 818.831.6659
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