



# The Swimmer

*John Koethe*

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John Koethe

**The Swimmer** John Koethe  
**A searching new collection from America's philosopher-poet**

John Koethe, in his tenth volume of poetry, investigates the capricious nature of everyday life, “the late-night jazz, great sex and all / The human shit defining what we are.” His poems—always dynamic and in process, never static or complete—luxuriate in the questions that punctuate the most humdrum of routines, rendering a robust portrait of an individual: complicated, quotidian, and resounding with truth. *The Swimmer* argues that this “energizes everything”: life’s trivialities, surprises, and disappointments, and the “terrible feeling of being just about to fall.”

## The Swimmer Details

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## From Reader Review The Swimmer for online ebook

### John Mihelic says

These poems bring me  
To mid century  
Reminding of big names  
That now only bring recognition  
To scholars of contemporary  
American verse, writing of movie theaters  
And oranges that aren't there

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### Christina says

3.5

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### Jim Higgins says

It would be 4.5 stars, if Goodreads allowed the half-stars.

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### Jim Coughenour says

Today I read a talk about rhyme delivered by Anthony Madrid, who explains why it once mattered so much

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All rhymers of every century believed—wordlessly, mutely, even incoherently believed—that rhyme, by punctuating and thus amplifying the effects of a poem's rhythm, helped to put a kind of **spell** on the reader, inducing unintelligible pleasure—and acquiescence to whatever was being said. They thought rhyme was a **drug**.

— and also explains why it doesn't matter anymore, except once in a while, as a "local grace." Tonight I read John Koethe's new book of poems that doesn't have any rhymes at all, or if it does I missed them. But I'm still buzzed.

If I idly ask myself, What is poetry now? What makes these poems work? I answer with something like this: poems that depend on rhyme are like songs that depend on rhythm (Madrid says, "The drive to make a song is partly a drive to channel rhythm"); but poems like Koethe's depend on a line of thought forced to its honest conclusion. In *The Swimmer* the thoughts come close together, the kind of thoughts that unthink themselves, because that's what thought does after a point. The poems are sharp with edges, chasms, with insights abandoned. In several the ending implodes what's been constructed.

...The sole reality is breath

Inflating the narrative of a life, wending its way  
Across the decades page by repetitive page  
Until it comes at last to nothing. There should be  
More I guess, though I don't really believe it.

...

Rilke: "You must change your life."  
But why? It feels convincing, but in the end  
It's just more language, and it disappears.

I recognize myself in these poems. Koethe grew up with Christianity – "Why did I believe it, if I ever did?" – and there's two-page poem on Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* and Abraham's merciless march to Moriah.

...The tale may be superstitious bullshit,  
Yet what resonates is the absence of anxiety, the sense  
Of purpose, the uncertainty. Greatness is the underlying theme,  
But it's invisible: greatness is the absolute, and it remains unknown.

There's a poem that begins with one of the cruel jokes of middle age

I used to like being young, and I still do,  
Because I think I still am.

"Little Guys Who Live Here" is about cats

—they make you feel at home  
In your house, which might otherwise feel empty.  
I like to wake up to a cat – a white one in my case –  
That's helped me make it through the night

Exactly – a brown one in my case. There's some shredded humor, as in "Skinny Poem" (homage to James Schuyler)

...I hate poems  
Of affirmation, poems too  
Unaware, too smooth  
To be true. Life is rough.

And there are some strong angry poems, a couple about racism that score deep without any resort to rhetoric.

There are some tricks in these poems, some cheesy twists and turns, but none feel fake. The darker poems stretch skepticism into nihilism, into a darkness intuited by a mind that sees what it's searching for after the glow of memories fade.

...Poems  
Should be true, true to what we think – "to thine own self  
Be true" – but then, what *do* we think. We reason in clichés –  
Otherwise we'd never move. Why should we deny  
This truth about ourselves? Can't we see what we are?

I could have quoted the ending of the last poem, the title poem, to make my point but that would be cheating, would be worse than a spoiler. It's a great poem, as good as it is because of what has come before.

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### **Lark Benobi says**

Wistful, and well-mannered, and sad, and loving, these poems give me the sense that I am in the presence of a fellow human being, one with a big soul. There is humility here, in the best sense of the word. The poet knows his strengths and doesn't hide them (that would be false humility)-- but he also confronts, sometimes quite directly, not only his own mortal smallness, but also the likelihood of his poems dying out one day.

There is a lot of Ecclesiastes here.

It feels as if I know a lot about Koethe after reading this collection--although his is not at all what I would call autobiographical or confessional poetry, it is strongly of a specific time and place, and it describes the historic circumstances of Koethe's life, and it uses the benchmarks and collective memories of people of his age and times. His experience is more refined and more erudite than mine, but recognizable as a history shared. There is a clearness of vision about the past, free of nostalgia, yet full of love.

I feel this poet would be a good friend of mine, if I had the privilege of knowing him, and although I don't have any friends currently who own even one navy blazer.

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### **Russell Howen says**

"The Swimmer", a book where poems flow for the thinking person, the remembering person, filled with the past, living in the present, and forward looking as well. Many of the poems remind one of the writer of Ecclesiastes, who says "Vanity, vanities, all is vanity" (chapter 1) and "To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven" (chapter 3)

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### **Autumn Kotsiuba says**

A little to prose-y for my taste.

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### **Sarah says**

Very good.

"And at least I'm happy, though lately I've come to recognize  
That happiness is not what it's cracked up to be. As for poetry,  
Poetry turned out fine, though nobody actually cares about it  
In the old sense anymore."

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