

HOW TO BE INAPPROPRIATE

Daniel Nester

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by Virginia Konchan

Daniel Nester has a morbid curiosity with inappropriateness, a curiosity that goes far beyond the pale of theory. In *How to Be Inappropriate*, we learn about the author's lifetime of unseemly behavior, curbed not by becoming a faculty member at a historically Catholic college but by fatherhood.

The subject matter of this book recalls the spiritual self-flagellations of none other than St. Augustine—but whereas Augustine's path was one of exorcism, Nester's tongue-in-cheek aim is to school others in the art of shock (or at least serve as a tour guide). *How to Be Inappropriate* would best be kept out of the hands of teenagers, however, lest life imitate art and incidences of streaking, mooning, egregious cussing, and independently conducted clinical trials of penile augmentation pills proliferate among bored youth. But really, would it be such a bad thing if they did?

That's the question Nester's book seeks to answer: what social functions do injunctions against "inappropriate behavior" serve? For starters, the term "inappropriate behavior" is almost entirely absent from scholarly publications predating 1980; since 1990, the term (clustered symptoms of which include such antisocial acts as spitting, property destruction, and exhibitionism) has bloomed like a hothouse flower. Culling from the work of such literary heavyweights as Chaucer and Jorie Graham to stake his claim in the taboo, Nester, in a close reading of Émile Durkheim, argues that religion (and by extension, culture) "plays the inevitable border-patrol role . . . of separating what is mythic, important, worthy of worship, and what is debased, vulgar, and grounds for punishment by the larger group," but that the responsibility of designating the boundary between the sacred and the profane belongs not to clergy, but to poets. This is, in Nester's view, what gives poets their "religious, even prophetic status" in society (whether acknowledged by the body politic or not).

Indeed, Nester's delight in smack-talk and dirty puns reflects



the sensibility of a self-declared "former poet"; one of the strongest essays among the twenty-five herein is "Goodbye to All Them," a nostalgic account of the twelve years the author spent as a resident of New York City, beginning as an MFA student at NYU and culminating in a mass email sent to 312 of his friends announcing his rejection of the dogma of the city's poets he'd inherited upon arrival: Never Leave New York, Our Ultimate Muse.

This account contains biting cultural criticism ("Unlike with painting or music, the poetry world's changes occur entirely outside anything that resembles the forces of reception . . . In New York, it is a self-licking ice cream cone that depends on untalented poets to keep the system going") and pseudonyms that gradate the blur of those vying for recognition in a dog-eat-dog city: "New School MFA Graduate X"; "Friend of Friend Gallery Curator"; "Famous Eastern European Poet." Nester captures the process by which his idea of craft (candor) clashed with the New York mode de rigueur (aloof disengagement) anecdotally: "I remember one reading where a Big Journal Editor mentioned E. M. Forster's famous quote from *Howard's End*, how writers should 'only connect' and 'live in fragments no longer' and how the Big Journal Editor giggled at these antiquated notions. Other New York Poets giggled as well."

Nester's literary essays on unconventional subjects, such as video gamer phenom Todd Rogers and the Christian parody rock band ApologetiX, are top-notch, and even the lighter essays are by no means filler. "Yes, I Tan: The Indoor Tanning Diaries" and "My Ass Life in the West," a transcription of hypothetical scenes from *The Catcher in the Rye* done round-robin style by Nester and six Asian students in a high school ESL class, are as funny as only life, unfabricated, can be. An excerpt:

Phoebe: What the hell are you doing?

Holden: Shut the hell up.

Phoebe: What the hell are you saying?

Phoebe: Just Open Your God Damn Ear And Listen to What I Said

Holden: Ya give me a break ass hole

Phoebe: You the asshole ask me to come you, and now what in the hell you want

Holden: Give me your ass I will bring you to my ass life in the West.

Phoebe: Shit, go fuck yourself

Unafraid of offending genteel audiences, *How to Be Inappropriate* details one man's struggle to divest himself from a passion for vulgarity, as expressible in many verbal and physical forms. For those who wonder what modern fables legendary satirists might spin if alive today, this is a great place to start. ♦