

## BOOKS

## Mother of invention

Los Angeles writer **Kim Dower** examines all that it means to be a mom in new collection of poems

BY SETH COMBS

W'e're all familiar with the varying clichés about book covers and not judging them, but in the case of "I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom," a new anthology of poems from Los Angeles-based writer Kim Dower, the book cover does speak almost as many volumes as the words inside.

"All my covers have been beautiful, but I told Red Hen, 'Listen to me, I have a vision for this book,'" Dower says, referring to Red Hen Press, which has published four previous collections of her poetry. "I didn't want to scare my publisher with a vision, but I saw a hardcover and this bizarre photo that my brother sent me."

The photo in question was a picture of Dower as a little girl staring intently at a popsicle in her hand. And while Dower says she meant the request to be somewhat tongue-in-cheek, Red Hen loved the photo and the hardcover idea.

"They took it very seriously and said, 'This is fantastic,' but they also said it would look like a memoir," Dower recalls. "I said, 'Oh, you're right. Forget it. Just a joke.' But then they came up with an illustrated cover based on the picture, and that's it."

Despite the initial concerns over the cover looking too much like a memoir, the illustrated rendering of the popsicle photo is suitable considering the contents of "I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom." For a poet as accomplished as Dower, the book is about as close to a memoir as she's likely to pen. An anthology of sorts, the book collects new and previously published poems that all center on the concept of motherhood. As a daughter and mother herself, it's a theme that Dower has examined a number of ways and from myriad perspectives over the years.

"I zoomed in and out of being a mother, having a mother, having a son, being a mother, my grandmother, so

it goes all over," says Dower. "I did try to put the poems in an order that would make it build in some way to when I'm caring for my own mother, when she has dementia, when there's the downside. Then when she dies and then there's this sort of aftermath."

Taken together, the poems in "I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom" range from humorous to heart-breaking, tragic to triumphant. As someone who works in marketing in her day job, Dower says the fact that the book is being released around Mother's Day isn't lost on her, but readers should know that the poems contained in the book aren't often cutesy and sentimental. After all, motherhood is complex and often difficult, and to suggest otherwise, however poetically, just isn't Dower's style. She doesn't do, as she puts it, that "Hallmark card kind of thing."

*Maybe it was something her mother said  
one morning as the young girl dipped  
her donut into a glass of whole milk  
powdered sugar still on her lips her mother tells her, don't get used to this*

So goes the opening poem of the book. Titled "She's never trusted happiness," the poem lays a template for the mix of childhood wonder and maternal pragmatism of the poems that follow. When asked just how much autobiography is in that particular poem, Dower gets playfully defensive.

"That poem is totally not autobiographical," Dower says. "You know, people think everything poets write



MARY ANN HALPIN

is, but you don't ask a thriller writer, 'Hey, did you dismember those people?'"

Still, Dower is more than open about the fact that most of her poems are, in fact, highly personal. Growing up in New York City, she moved to Los Angeles in the late '70s working in the publishing and marketing fields. Despite a degree in creative writing, she says it wasn't until her son was grown and heading to college himself that she returned to writing poetry. Since then, she has published four collections,

beginning with "Air Kissing on Mars," and has been praised by the Los Angeles Times and O Magazine for her "unexpected and sublime" verse. In 2016, she was named West Hollywood's city poet laureate and has been nominated four times for the Pushcart Prize for poetry.

Even while working in marketing, Dower says she's learned over the years that

when it comes to the muse, she'll drop almost any task when the spirit strikes.

"When a poem comes knocking at the door, everything gets dropped for that poem," Dower says. "It may just be five minutes to get it down, to get the idea down and open a document on the computer. I'll just give it the title and I'll write the first two sentences, and then I'll put it

**Warwick's presents Kim Dower**

**When:** 7:30 p.m. Thursday

**Where:** Warwick's, 7812 Girard Ave., La Jolla

**Tickets:** Free (limited capacity and registration is encouraged)

**Online:** [warwicks.com](http://warwicks.com)

**"I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom"**

by Kim Dower (Red Hen Press, 2022; 128 pages)

in my poems-in-progress folder. But when I'm writing a poem, nothing else comes into my head."

Dower hopes that commitment comes across to readers who pick up "I Wore This Dress Today for You, Mom." In the end, it's a brilliant, meditative examination of maternity and motherhood that she hopes inspires readers to examine their own relationships.

"They're meant to feel reading these poems; to feel sadness or joy or have their own memories flood them because that's what a good poem will do. It will just help you to shake loose the things that are important to you," Dower says. "I love all the poems in this book. I love them all, but I feel like they no longer belong to me. I want them to belong to other people. I want people to have this book in their collections or by their beds, on their shelves, and I want them to reach for it if they want a poem to make them sad or to make them laugh or to make them think of their own mother or their own childhood. I want them to give it to their mothers or daughters or sons. It's a gift book, it's my gift, and I'm really proud of it."

Combs is a freelance writer.

