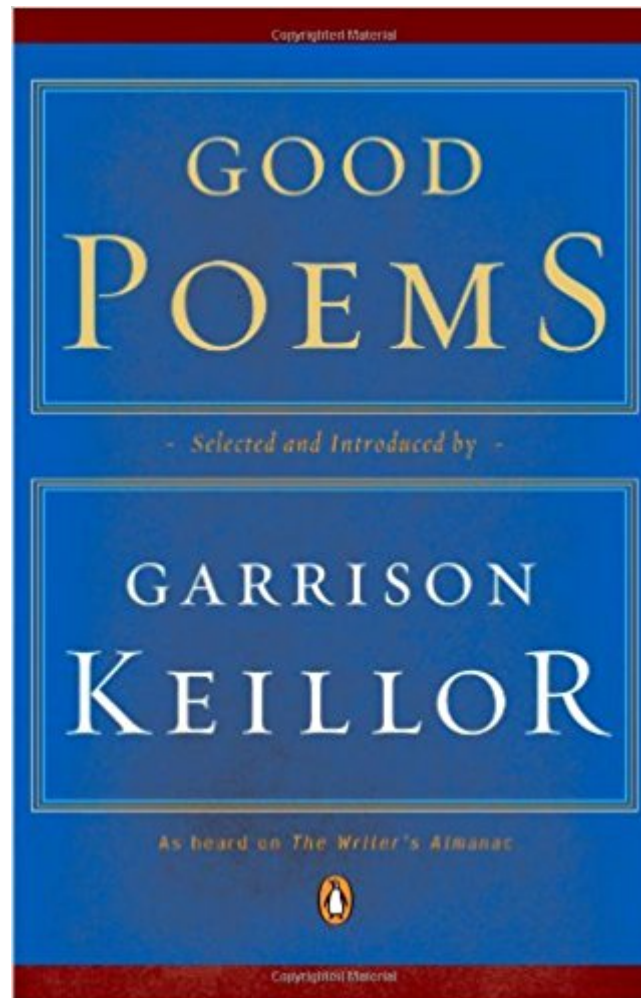


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Good Poems



Synopsis

Every day people tune in to The Writer's Almanac on public radio and hear Garrison Keillor read them a poem. And here, for the first time, is an anthology of poems from the show, chosen by Keillor for their wit, their frankness, their passion, their "utter clarity in the face of everything else a person has to deal with at 7 a.m." Good Poems includes verse about lovers, children, failure, everyday life, death, and transcendence. It features the work of classic poets, such as Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Robert Frost, as well as the work of contemporary greats such as Howard Nemerov, Charles Bukowski, Donald Hall, Billy Collins, Robert Bly, and Sharon Olds. It's a book of poems for anybody who loves poetry whether they know it or not.

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Customer Reviews

A couple of generations back, publishers used to put out fat poetry anthologies - half of them edited by Louis Untermeyer - for families to put on their bookshelves to elevate the cultural tone of their home. These edifying works were organized by "subject" (God, Seafaring, Romance, Hope, Nature), and leaned heavily toward poems from prior centuries, or poems which exhibited a comforting folksiness, or wore uplifting morals on their sleeves. There's a far larger public today which is actually prepared to read poems for pleasure, and Garrison Keillor has put together a poetic omnibus, also arranged by subject (I particularly like the group of poems on "Yellow" followed by the ones on "Snow"), which is otherwise quite the opposite of the old workhorses. Yes, prior centuries are represented, but the center of gravity lies among good modern poets, most of them still living, most of whom you never had a chance to read in school. They have been selected for

both memorability and straightforward style. There are often flashes of humor, and trendily obscure versifiers need not apply, but there's no lack of depth or sophistication. (Think Billy Collins, who is well represented here.) Those of us who already read a lot of poetry, and those of us who suffered with glazed eyes through opaque symbols in English class, will both find fresh pleasures, simple ones and subtle, in this treasury. It's what a poetry anthology should be: a sampler, a taster's counter at the many-flavored ice cream shop of verse. You can find old friends and new ones, and learn who you want to explore in depth later on. And this anthology lays out a richer feast of new friends than any other I've encountered. As a bonus, there's Keillor's bluntly opinionated preface, in which he trashes Marianne Moore in favor of Elizabeth Bishop, "Saint Sylvia" in favor of Anne Sexton, and T.S. Eliot on general principles. It was a hoot even though I disagreed with him on two out of three.

"Good Poems" contains some of the finest works that I've ever read. Whether you are an avid reader of poetry, or someone who has just been introduced to it, you will not be disappointed with this collection. From The Psalm Book, to William Shakespeare, to Billy Collins, all are sure to enjoy. From the very beginning, one's attention is captured by the wickedly irreverent and funny poem by Thomas Lux, entitled "Poem in Thanks." In it, he starts out by addressing his prayer to "Lord Whoever..." and ends it by thanking the Lord for the (expletive) birds singing! I particularly enjoyed "This is Just To Say", a whimsical piece by William Carlos Williams, and the equally witty retort of the same name by Erica-Lynn Gambino: "I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast forgive me they were delicious so sweet and so cold" to which, Ms. Gambino replies: "I have just asked you to get out of my apartment even though you never thought I would forgive me you were driving me insane" Whimsical, spiritual, somber, and profound (Emily Dickinson - Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant...), this selection by Mr. Kellor is arranged in such a way that one will be taken on an emotional roller coaster ride. "Good Poems" is a 'Must Have' for all lovers of well arranged words.

"Elizabeth Bishop was a woman, ditto Emily Dickinson, and she can take your head off with one line. . ." That is Garrison Keillor's description of Ms. Dickinson as he debunks the term "Women's lit" as one of the dumb ideas of his generation in his brief introduction to this collection of "good" poems he has gleaned from his radio program "The Writer's Almanac." T. S. Eliot he describes as a "great stuffed owl" who "didn't get out of the house much." Allen Ginsberg was "something of a gasbag" while Anne Sexton is a "hot number." Opinionated? Yes, but I find I agree with Mr. Keillor more

times than I don't. I read this obviously honest and thoughtful introduction three times and then called up friends who love poetry and read portions of it to them. Mr. Keillor includes a lot of poets here, many of whom I did not know previously. You guessed it. There are no Ginsberg or Eliot selections included. The criterion is that the poems should have "somehow stuck" with Keillor and with "some of the listeners." Keillor obviously is guided by the time restraints of his radio show since the poems must be short. (I do not believe for a moment that he does not care for Matthew Arnold's "Dover Beach," a poem probably too long to include here.) The anthology is short on 19th Century poets although Ms. Emily does take first place with eight selections. Even though Mr. Keillor would not be happy with long-winded praise, suffice it to say that, as the Brits would, that this book is altogether "lovely." And, Mr. Keillor, you are one of those Americans who make me happy I live here. Didn't you say it best in one of your essays, something about seeing the firelights of other gentle people?

I liked this book. My husband liked this book. However, this is not a book for 'poetry snobs'--and you know who you are :-). This is a book for people who like poetry that creates images and mini-stories. This is a book for the sort of people who like to be transported to crisp autumn days, the sound of leaves crunching beneath your feet, blah, blah ; or into relationships you've never had. It is not a book for people who want to be challenged by imagery and wordage. It is a relaxing book, not a stimulating verbal ride. And it is this dichotomy -- between regular-joe poetry readers and the ecstatic fancy-readers - that explains the variances in the numbers of stars reviewers have given this book. Four stars. If you like Mr. Keillor's morning readings, you should like this book. Note: This collection contains some 'erotic' material. Just thought you'd want to know, before you go out and buy this book for that special niece or nephew, or for your own child. You don't want your sister calling, all ticked off because her sixteen year-old came to her asking what such-n-such means.

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