



How to Read Poetry Like a Professor: A Quippy and Sonorous Guide to Verse

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From the bestselling author of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* comes this essential primer to reading poetry like a professor that unlocks the keys to enjoying works from Lord Byron to the Beatles.

No literary form is as admired and feared as poetry. Admired for its lengthy pedigree—a line of poets extending back to a time before recorded history—and a ubiquitous presence in virtually all cultures, poetry is also revered for its great beauty and the powerful emotions it evokes. But the form has also instilled trepidation in its many admirers mainly because of a lack of familiarity and knowledge.

Poetry demands more from readers—intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually—than other literary forms. Most of us started out loving poetry because it filled our beloved children's books from Dr. Seuss to Robert Louis Stevenson. Eventually, our reading shifted to prose and later when we encountered poetry again, we had no recent experience to make it feel familiar. But reading poetry doesn't need to be so overwhelming. In an entertaining and engaging voice, Thomas C. Foster shows readers how to overcome their fear of poetry and learn to enjoy it once more.

From classic poets such as Shakespeare, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and Edna St. Vincent Millay to later poets such as E.E. Cummings, Billy Collins, and Seamus Heaney, *How to Read Poetry Like a Professor* examines a wide array of poems and teaches readers:

How to read a poem to understand its primary meaning.

The different technical elements of poetry such as meter, diction, rhyme, line structures, length, order, regularity, and how to learn to see these elements as allies rather than adversaries.

How to listen for a poem's secondary meaning by paying attention to the echoes that the language of poetry summons up.

How to hear the music in poems—and the poetry in songs!

With *How to Read Poetry Like a Professor*, readers can rediscover poetry and reap its many rewards.

How to Read Poetry Like a Professor: A Quippy and Sonorous Guide to Verse Details

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Mark says

As another reviewer said, this book has indeed been written before, and better. Foster, in an effort to be true to his brand, I imagine, spends too much time trying to deliver on the "quippy," resulting in a book that, while approachable and at least somewhat instructive, will do little to actually develop one's appreciation for poetry. Which presumably is the reason someone comes to this kind of book in the first place -- to better *enjoy* poetry, not just to be able to rattle off the names of different types of poems.

If you're short on time and have zero knowledge of poetry, I suppose this is an acceptable place to start. But don't expect it to make the subject come alive for you. For that you're much better off with a book like Frances Mayes' *The Discovery of Poetry: A Field Guide to Reading and Writing Poems*.

M. Ryan says

This book has been written before. And better. I suppose this is a fine manual for English undergrad students. But even the selections Foster chooses as examples are those we have read many times before ("Because I could not stop for Death," "Birches," "Jabberwocky," "The Road Not Taken").

Leigh says

I won this copy in a Goodreads Giveaway!

I loved, loved, loved this! I learned so much and I giggled through most of it. What a fun way to learn about poetry! I wanted to get better at understanding the poetry that I am reading and this book certainly helped me to do that!

Dayna Smith says

An excellent primer on how to understand and read poetry. All of Foster's books are marvelous and this one is no exception. A must read for teachers, but very helpful for students and lay-people are well.

Crystal says

I have enjoyed two other of Foster's books and even use one in my college-level Literature Appreciation class. I read this book and was hoping that I could employ it to help my students better understand poetry and learn to appreciate and enjoy it. While I am well educated in literature and writing and have even written a few award winning poems, I have to say that I wasn't as pleased with this book as I have been with the others I

have read.

Foster's wit and humor conveys the idea that there is some much that is complicated about poetry and that understanding it can be very hard. He makes lots of jokes and jabs that are humorous and attempt to disarm the complicated alarm set over poetry. Unfortunately, in my opinion, he is only mildly successful. The complications are still there and while he does break it down a bit, it still really doesn't do much to encourage the appreciation of poetry for the average person/student.

There are only a few chapters in this book that I might find usable in my Lit Apprec course. I'm disappointed but such is life. The complications of poetry are a bit like math and this can be discouraging to those who just want to appreciate the answer/solution to the math problem rather than being compelled to learn all the steps in working out a complicated math equation. The beauty of an answer can be appreciated just like a the beauty of a poem without needing to understand every step of the solution/creation. I wish Foster would have included a chapter surround this idea.

There is much that is good here for more advanced readers and I would even say that this might be a usable text for a class singularly focused on understanding poetry in a technical sense.

It is a good book, just not what I was hoping for this time.

Gloria says

Thomas Foster makes a valiant attempt to make poetry accessible to those who do not read it often or find it elusive. The two take-aways I value are: read a poem according to its punctuation and not just to the end of the line (this really does help the poem make sense), and read a poem aloud.

This is simple advice that makes a difference in flow and comprehension, but Mr. Foster still got caught up a bit too much in technicalities that perhaps are more important for the poet to understand rather than the reader. He does include quite a few examples which clarifies much, so overall this is helpful, but perhaps did not turn me into an avid poetry reader at this time.

Avel Deleon says

My English teacher during High School:

In the next few months, we are going to study poetry.

The mere of sight of poetry sent me into a cave, a cave, I knew a little too well during my sophomore year in high school. What did I think about poetry? When I first encountered poetry, I found it to be a drag, convoluted, confusing, and boring. During my sophomore year in college, I had a reawaking, one which included reading 100's of books and among those books were the plays of Shakespeare, a poet I have grown very fond of. NOW, I kind of really like poetry. I recently took a course were we read poem after poem deciphering each one like a detective who's attempting to figure out a murder. I just finished "How To Read Poetry Like A Professor" a book that explains the intricacies of poetry. The book covers sonnets, rhyme, Images, symbols, haiku and free verse. If you want to learn about poetry and it's magical powers this book is worthwhile. This is a book you don't necessarily need to read from beginning to end like a novel rather you

can read it on the topic that most interest you.

Lori says

Thomas Foster teaches readers how to approach poetry to make it meaningful to them. He discusses the poem's sentence structure, encouraging readers to pause at punctuation as one would do in reading other literature. He discusses arrangement into stanzas, rhyme schemes, meter, repetition, and more. He eventually moves into symbolism and other topics which often scare students. He created a readable introduction to poetry, with limited technical jargon. While armchair poetry enthusiasts may be the most appreciative audience, non-majors taking literature classes with a fair amount of poetry will benefit. I received an uncorrected proof through LibraryThing Early Reviewers with the expectation of an unbiased review.

Paul Hankins says

If you have read the other Foster books on literature and novels, then the set-up and arrangement of this newest title (March 2018) will not surprise you or disrupt the flow of your reading into the ideas presented.

Foster provides interesting commentary in the introduction that would be well-suited for the upper level grades as an re-introduction of sorts to poetry and poetic forms. Foster writes, "I think that for most people, however, the matter isn't so much not liking poetry as feeling somehow overmatched, as if it were a contest and the other side had better equipment and more skill" (3). For the rest of the introduction, Foster presents poetry in its bare-bones form and puts the would-be poetry reader at ease for presenting what both bring to the table by way of text and reader.

In "Sounds of Sense" and "Sound Beyond Sense," Foster brings the reader gently back to poetry if the reader is patient with returning to some of that early learning in meter and rhyme and literary devices. For the upper grade reader, these elements of the book may serve well as have the other two books mentioned prior. Early on within this book, however, I note that that Foster is reserved in the examples used and they seem more accessible and familiar and I have to think that this is due in part to the potential fear and trepidation poetry brings along with it.

The rest of the book presents like the literature and novels with quippy titles followed by a short chapter which includes a definition of the term, and exploration of the term, and samples from the larger poetry community.

As more and more classroom teachers seek out nonfiction text for the classroom, this one would be very nice not only as a primer for poetry but as an informing vehicle for the sounds, techniques, and moves we seek in prose.

Elaine says

As someone interested in poetry, but no more of an introduction than that one gets in a high school class, I

found this book to be quite thorough and readable. Because of it, I was also introduced to some newer poets. The conclusion provided a lovely ending with its beautiful prose.

I highly recommend this to anyone needing a brush up on terms or introduction to poetry. I received this copy through a Goodreads Giveaway.

Alison Robinson says

Yet again, Foster has been able to explain elements of literature that confuse students, or at the least deter them, in a way that makes learning fun and entertaining. I also really enjoyed the examples he selected. I will be using this with my students this year and I am thankful for his humor.

Jim Razinha says

I wasn't sure I wanted to learn to read poetry like a professor, but I requested a review copy of this some months before publication - I didn't win that particular book lottery, but got it on my own anyway.

I set this aside to read Stephen Fry's *The Ode Less Travelled* first, which made a world of difference in my reception of Foster's work. While not as lyrical nor as educated as Fry's, Foster nonetheless does a good job covering many bases. I was disappointed in the attention to "free verse", as that is and will like be ever baffling as to how it is even considered poetry (Foster says that what makes free verse "verse and not merely free" is "rules"...and does precious little to explain those rules).

And on Cummings, Foster says of "anyone lived in a pretty how town"

Before we leave that passage, it would be unfair to not admit that it is a whole lot of fun to say, even if you stumble. Maybe because you stumble. Stumbling is half the fun. Therein lies the secret to Cummings's charm: he leaves you baffled but smiling.

Well, actually... I could not disagree more. I find Cummings the height of irritating. And I'm not smiling.

I'm cherry picking...there is a lot here and Foster treats it lightly (a lot lighter than non-professor Fry). His humor grates after a while, but it's still a good resource. And I am sure now that I don't want to read poetry like a professor. Even with the two books under my belt, I don't know how much poetry I will or want to read.

But, I can still recommend this book.

L.E. Fidler says

there's some very helpful refresher info in this little nugget from everyone's favorite lit professor Thomas C. Foster, but I'd be wary using it with totally untrained readers of poetry.

let me explain a little...

i use How to Read Literature Like a Professor as part of my summer reading for a course because it provides an accessible reintroduction to reading literature for high school students. foster openly admits those readers were not his intended audience (he anticipates an older squad, his age and older, who are hoping to spend some quality retirement time getting down with their inner lit geeks - which is awesome, but the AP audience thanks him highly for his efforts regardless), but i was hoping to recreate some of the same magic with this one and use it (or selections from it) to help my nervous poetry readers flourish.

i just don't think that's gonna happen.

foster spends much of the first one-hundred pages or so in a deluge of poetic jargon that is off-putting to even the most sympathetic of poetry learners. the latter half of the book - which opens up the discussion to more concretely accessible items like imagery, symbolism, diction, etc. - is ultimately more successful.

as always, i like foster's central message about the genre (what is it, even if that means effing the ineffable a bit, how it works, and why it is), but once he starts trying to highlight the stresses and jumps into the poetic irony of the word "iamb" being trochaic, he loses my intended audience.

3 stars. good but nothing particularly new here (ESPECIALLY the chapter on sonnets...)

Edward Chamberlin says

I enjoy all of Foster's "how-to" books, since they are always inspirational for me, getting me to seek out more books to read (or movies to see, in the case of the Silver Screen book). I thought there were lots of useful tips for reading poetry early on in this book (read it aloud after a first pass-through; follow the sentence structure instead of the line structure to gain meaning; read a poem multiple times), but that kind of petered out in the second half, which was interesting enough to read, but not quite as relevant to the topic at hand. Overall, I would recommend this book for anyone seeking to get into lyric poetry, however, and it serves as a useful introduction to a literary genre that was never big, but is probably dying out even moreso in this day and age.

Zachary Morris says

I thought this book was absolutely brilliant while I was reading it! For my summer reading this past summer I read How to Read Literature Like a Professor for my AP literature class and I enjoyed it a lot. I learned about the craft of literary analysis while also feeling like I took away a lot about writing too. That's how I felt about this books as well. I write poetry for fun and reading this book was fun seeing the different techniques used to write poetry as well as how to recognize these different techniques. I feel like I will definitely be coming back to this book some time soon and will probably enjoy it just as much because I'll have learned even more that second time!

There were points in this book that made me feel like I could never achieve excellence like the masters, but there was one section about awful poems and how not every poem was perfect and that gave me some hope for my own future writing. And with writing I think I'll be able to better get into the mind of a writer and better analyze different poetry (which is the original meaning of buying and reading this book haha).
