



Collected Poems

Donald Justice

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This celebratory volume gives us the entire career of Donald Justice between two covers, including a rich handful of poems written since *New and Selected Poems* was published in 1995. Winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Justice has been hailed by his contemporary Anthony Hecht as “the supreme heir of Wallace Stevens.” In poems that embrace the past, its terrors and reconciliations, Justice has become our poet of living memory. The classic American melancholy in his titles calls forth the tenor of our collective passages: “Bus Stop,” “Men at Forty,” “Dance Lessons of the Thirties,” “The Small White Churches of the Small White Towns.” This master of classical form has found in the American scene, and in the American tongue, all those virtues of our literature and landscape sought by Emerson and Henry James. For half a century he has endeavored, with painterly vividness and plainspoken elegance, to make those local views part of the literary heritage from which he has so often taken solace, and inspiration.

School Letting Out
(Fourth or Fifth Grade)

The afternoons of going home from school
Past the young fruit trees and the winter flowers.
The schoolyard cries fading behind you then,
And small boys running to catch up, as though
It were an honor somehow to be near—
All is forgiven now, even the dogs,
Who, straining at their tethers, used to bark,
Not from anger but some secret joy.

From the Hardcover edition.

Collected Poems Details

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From Reader Review Collected Poems for online ebook

Cooper Renner says

Just today finished re-reading this book. Even here, in the work of this very stringent poet, there are poems that are lesser, but the fine poems are very fine indeed, both modern and very much not common to our time, marked by dignity, restraint and stateliness. There is autobiography here, but not confession; ennui but not the sickness unto death. Justice is one of the very best American poets of the past 50 years. I want to note, HOWEVER, that Knopf/Random House did an embarrassingly amateur job in transferring this book to ebook, which I just read. Apparently they just scanned the book and did no copy-editing. The letters "tl" are rendered as "d" throughout--gently becomes gendy, Atlantic becomes Adantic, etc. In the title of one poem "Villanelle" becomes "Vittanelle"; numbers become letters. Line breaks don't occur where they ought. A major multi-national publisher charging \$14.99 for an ebook ought to do much better than this.

I've just bought the ebook edition of this collection (which I once had in hardcover--or maybe I still do, in storage?), and have begun reading again. The earliest poems are strong strong which is not at all usual in a collected edition. Justice "looked" formal and polite--and indeed he was--but that did not prevent the poems from being far more modern than a glance indicates.

Very few poets deserve a collected poems. Justice does, not just because he was so careful and astringent with his collections and the individual poems, but also because the overall quality is so high that the collected edition provides the best context for this very very fine poet whose work is still insufficiently respected.

wally says

amazon kindle.

all of these poems from justice evoke a mood, or a place, or a people. some good stuff here, a few that i enjoyed are the traveling poems. a number of them, say like this one about a character passing on a train, seeing a lighted window.

these poems help recall a time and place where you have been...who hasn't passed a lighted window and wondered what was happening inside...all the possibilities. another is a waiting room somewhere...wondering about the other travelers, where are they bound for, what is the reason for their silence. have you ever wondered that...i've always thought it was a bit absurd, myself, each one hunkered down w/whatever problems they're fleeing or going back to...and the poem adds the idea that the sight of others around them have added to that burden.

another hoot of a poem has to do w/a description of someone stepping away from an urinal, unflushed...ha ha ha ha ha! i spose only male readers can relate to that one...everyone standing there, ashamed of their own piss, looking up, trying to read the graffiti that some wit managed to scroll in the grout-line....call br-549.

yet another is one about a dressmaker's dummy. that one is great....a character who spent time in the attic w/the dummy, away from "the remote buffooneries of the weather."

they are all over the map, miami, the midwest, other places, full of allusions to other things, places, people.

porches. people sitting on porches...or maybe grandpa, standing there looking across the land.

a sense of the unfathomable, a sense that one and all are aware of the all the big questions....what is a man, what does he need...cheeseburger in paradise and a cold beer, me, no phone, no pool, no pets...ah, but that isn't going to happen, is it...

but words can make it so, at times...seems like

Matt says

I picked up this book on a trip to Boston with some friends. I was standing in the poetry section with another guy just browsing and he saw the book and told me I must read Justice. I highly respect my friend's literary taste, so I put down the other book of poetry I was looking at and decided to purchase Justice, based solely on that recommendation. I must say, I was not disappointed. I normally gravitate toward free verse for its accessibility and whimsy and away from more technical poetry but I found in Justice a poetry that was both highly technical (some of his most interesting poems are villanelles) but retained a sense of capriciousness while still remaining accessible to almost any reader. In my opinion, he blends the technical savvy of Wallace Stevens with the unique eye and open language of William Carlos Williams.

Justice was a poet in addition to being both a painter and a musician, so his work is rife with references to all three art forms. Yet his work is still fresh and vibrant to a reader who is not well-versed in all those forms. His is not a poetry of exclusion but one of inclusion, inviting the reader to see what he is seeing and revel in the beauty of the commonplace and familiar. His work is among some of the highest caliber of the twentieth century, despite his relative anonymity. Do not miss his work.

Daniel says

Hot damn, what a fantastic collection of poetry.

The best of Justice seems to come at the beginning and the end of this collection. I wish I could describe what sets his good poems apart from his forgettable ones, but I simply can't. What I can tell you is that it's evident that Justice pays close attention to form. He seems to love working with repetition, and perhaps that is where the beauty of his poems really lie. Life is so repetitive, after all. It adds up to some sort of quiet meditation. The best come out appearing timeless and classic, and more often than not, melancholic and nostalgic.

One of my favorite poems is "Southern Gothic," a poem that presents a confusion over the decay of the South and the vague memories of what should be there, but is not. Trellises are "too frail almost to bear/ The memory of a rose, much less a rose." The ending sticks with me:

"No damask any more prevents the moon,
But it unravels, peeling from a wall,
Red roses within roses within roses."

Gary McDowell says

Contemporary-ish master of form.

The elegy is one of my favorite poems.

Marcos (Bubba) says

Donald Justice is one of the most approachable poets I have ever read. He is not afraid to let the reader see the source of his material. Nor is he timid in recycling phrases and lines from his own poems when the initial thought gives way to another. Justice indulges himself at times in nostalgia but never in a truly detract-able way. The formality which permeates his work is never pretentious or obvious. Justice is a master of oblique stateliness who rightly sees that "To the young poet, of course, everything looks poetic-".

Jacob says

"The Sunset Maker," his 1987 collection of quietly formal, thematically linked poems of childhood, is a beautiful book. Beautiful in its handling of nostalgia and in its lyricism. Emotionally reserved, the poems rarely announce the force that drove them to the page, and some readers will accuse the poems of treading too lightly, or, maybe, for being emotionally inaccessible. But I don't think either is true.

He writes a lot about music, piano lessons in particular, and about painting (and about Henry James). The poems often operate like musical compositions and, as one of the blurbs points out, impressionist paintings. Because of the tropical locale (Florida) or maybe the blank verse, there's a kinship to Derek Walcott. Bishop and Frost come to mind too. So it's old school. In a good--near impossible to maintain for a full a book's length--way.

Poetry Daily featured an essay by William Logan about one of the sonnets in this book...which is why I read it. Here's the link:

http://poems.com/special_features/pro...

Gwen says

From Dirda's review in The Washington Post 8/15/04:

Readers soon learn that each literary genre possesses its own particular rhythm, its characteristic feel or atmosphere. When we open a Golden Age mystery, whether by Agatha Christie or John Dickson Carr, we expect an air of commedia dell'arte: a period glow, some wit, the various puppets going through the familiar motions of murder, feint and discovery. Just as a thriller sucks us into its plot-driven frenzy, a romance novel creates the soft-focused wish-fulfillment of a dream.

Donald Justice -- who died August 6 at age 78 after a prolonged illness -- has sometimes been likened to that old magician Wallace Stevens. But he is plainer, more overtly personal, without the abundant flow and exhibitionism of Stevens. Most of Justice's poems require only a single page, and some feel as if they end just as they're getting started. His themes are the old reliables, the ones we never fail to respond to: memories of childhood and youth, elegies for the dead, portraits of the lonely, artistic and doomed, reflections on life's shadows and disappointments. Early in his career, Justice liked to play with traditional forms -- sestinas, above all -- and these poems can be marvelous contraptions, true sleights of fancy. Regrettably, some modern readers look suspiciously on fixed forms as mere exercises in linguistic or metric ingenuity, and so tend to prefer quieter, less obtrusively structured meditations.

Henry James, Kafka, D.H. Lawrence and even John D. MacDonald are among the other writers Justice alludes to or cites. He can hit off Wallace Stevens perfectly, balancing homage and parody -- "Mordancies of the armchair" -- or announce the third section of "Homage to the Memory of Wallace Stevens" with just the right sententious flourish: "The opera of the gods is finished."

D. Thompson says

I went to the university where he last taught, but missed out on his teaching. I purchased this book to get an idea of the words within the man.

James says

His sonnets are great. Actually, pretty much everything from the first book is awesome.

Unfortunately, I had a teacher who force-fed us this book for half a semester, and my initial appreciation has waned considerably. I think a lot of his shit is super repetitive. Like, half of the poems should be titled "Variations on a theme from Henry James" or "I Was a Lonely Child." WE GET IT, DJ. Also, there's some not-so-subtle misogyny in a good deal of the poems that makes the poet seem like kind of a douche.

Long story short, this is a poet worth reading -- more than one time -- but not worth fucking obsessing over.

Chris Allison says

There were probably about a dozen poems out of the entire collected works that really connected with me.

I appreciate his ability to create a mood, and, when it's done so with clarity as in the famous *Men at Forty*, I really enjoyed it. There is a certain nostalgia in the collection that is really moving.

The poems I didn't enjoy as much seem laden with topics of personal meaning to the poet (e.g. music) and allusions I don't follow. I enjoyed the collections *Night Light* and *Departures* more than the Pulitzer winning *Selected Poems*. I enjoyed *The collection Sunset Maker* the least.

Poems I liked include:

Sadness
Men at Forty
To Waken A Small Person
Here at Katmandu
To Satan in Heaven
A Winter Ode to the Old Men of Lummus Park
Counting the Mad
The Grandfathers
But That is Another Story
The Tourist from Syracuse
In Memory of the Unknown Poet
Young Girls Growing Up
The Miami of Other Days
There is a gold light in certain old paintings

Eddie Watkins says

An heir of Wallace Stevens and Weldon Kees (and also editor of Kees' Collected), Donald Justice is a highly (though light-handedly) sophisticated poet of melancholy, nostalgia, and dreams; Edward Hopper's ghost drifts through his work, with poems of lonely bus stops and empty streets and other mundane scenes, though his Hopperian sensibility is suffused with fresh air and delicacy and an inobtrusive metaphysics.

His poems are composed of rather simple words used in subtly surprising ways, elegantly homespun with an aesthetic detachment but also a vulnerability. And while his poems are clearly very personal, there's none of the sweaty insistence often found in confessional poets.

His poems blend in a wash of memories with the fan's whirr on a front porch in Florida on a late afternoon with a nice cold drink at hand.

justin says

I think Justice is a remarkable poet, though perhaps a little too stuffy to be considered among my favorites, still there is a lot to learn from him. Here's one of my favorites--

On the Death of Friends in Childhood

We shall not ever meet them bearded in heaven,
Nor sunning themselves among the bald of hell;
If anywhere, in the deserted schoolyard at twilight,
Forming a ring, perhaps, or joining hands
In games whose very names we have forgotten.
Come, memory, let us seek them there in the shadows.

Diya says

I feel like I just rated it down because we spent so long on it in class.

Jude Bee says

Mr. Justice as the potential and potent liar in the eyes of the public

Mr. Justice does not write in the ornate High Romantic diction of Keats.

Nor does he utilize those beloved and time-honored emotive vehicles such as that 'dramatic syntax' which was so convenient for Yeats to create drama and romanticized feelings through 'arguing against the impossible'. Hard as we look, we can not locate the misplaced and distorted images comparable to those in Dali's paintings that are so determinedly psychoanalytic. Yet when we put all the seemingly transparent elements of his poems in the Night Light together -- the minimally enjambed lines, the subtle syntax, the diction that is so simple as to verge on mundaneness, the clear lacking of rich and juicy tropes no versifiers can resist, and the nuanced rhetoric -- somehow a vision of utter other-worldliness materializes in front of us, defying any earthly logic we might have believed we possess. Maybe Nobokov was right after all. Maybe 'all stories are fairy tales'. Maybe all writers are liars, and Mr. Justice is simply a better liar than the rest of us, someone who lies through simple and almost naïve-sounding language. Maybe that was how he stole and abused our trusts in the first place. But then maybe there is magic in simple words after all. Maybe there is magic in this simple world as well. Maybe by shunning the iridescent 'cloth of heaven', we can actually be looking at the magic of this world for once. Maybe we all should be ashamed of ourselves, writers who believe only in the power of imagination, and the potential of words to be systematic misleading.

But maybe all we see is only Mr. Justice's imagination. Maybe we shall never be able to know the answer to that question. All we do know is that Mr. Justice's poetry absolutely blossomed in the first book of poetry he wrote after stepping into free verse from his more formal earlier endeavors (maybe we all should start from writing metric poems?). The only reason he'll be losing a star in this review is he seemed to fail -- or maybe not care enough? believe enough? -- to advocate his poetry to the general public, and thus remained a 'poet's poet' to this day, despite all the poets influenced by him and the Iowa Writer's Workshops. But on second thought, let's not.
