



Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry

David Orr

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"David Orr is no starry-eyed cheerleader for contemporary poetry; Orr's a critic, and a good one. . . .

Beautiful & Pointless is a clear-eyed, opinionated, and idiosyncratic guide to a vibrant but endangered art form, essential reading for anyone who loves poetry, and also for those of us who mostly just admire it from afar." —Tom Perrotta

Award-winning *New York Times Book Review* poetry columnist David Orr delivers an engaging, amusing, and stimulating tour through the world of poetry. With echoes of Francine Prose's *Reading Like a Writer*, Orr's *Beautiful & Pointless* offers a smart and funny approach to appreciating an art form that many find difficult to embrace.

Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry Details

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From Reader Review Beautiful and Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry for online ebook

Judy says

A fun, informative book
delivered what it promis'd
to help a person such as
me, read a modern poem and
glean a degree of meaning.

This is no heavy tome, it
won't bore to tears, put to sleep,
or overly tax the brain.
No subtle coercion is
exacted. Think what you please.

If you're wondering why I'm
writing this way. Check out the
chapter on form, number three,
could it be mechanical,
resemblance or metrical?

(Ah, you'll have to read the book and see!)

James says

After I made it through the first two chapters, which seem strangely condescending, puzzling through basic philosophical questions about the value of poetry for non-poets without adding much new insight beyond the author's educated frame of references, the book gets better. For instance, I like David Orr's brief, tongue-in-cheek, yet accurate summary of recent poetics:

"Still, though, we weren't quite tired of fighting about traditional forms. So a group of writers calling themselves 'New Formalists' began insisting that poets should really start writing sonnets again, neatly stepping around the fact that many poets had, in fact, been writing sonnets for decades. At more or less the same time, a bunch of writers called the Language Poet were insisting that sonnets were passe, neatly stepping around the fact that many poets, had, in fact, been avoiding writing sonnets for decades. Naturally, these two groups were much discussed, even though, as the scholar David Bromwich diplomatically put it with reference to the Language Poets, "they do not, as yet, appear to write good poems."

I also love this quote: "Our avant-gardists have yet to topple capitalism by undermining narrative, but they've gotten some coveted jobs and made their way onto syllabi."

I think I'm going to like the rest of this book.

Ellie says

Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry by David Orr is not just another book about poetry. I have read many books about poetry. About how to read it, about what it is, about different forms and styles, and about how to write it. Many of these books were excellent, some were exhilarating. But they all left me overwhelmed and as unable to talk about poetry as before (or close to).

Orr talks about these books up front and offers a different perspective: a chance to listen to a poet and poetry critic share his personal experience as a reader of poetry, a way to begin to develop a language in which to have conversations about poetry.

And so begin this unpretentious, highly accessible book. Orr compares the beginning of a relationship with poetry (which he describes as the one activity people have a relationship with that goes beyond the "doing") as visiting a foreign country. He says all that is needed is "patience and the willingness" to book a ticket. And, he adds a little later, the willingness to tolerate being confused and "not knowing," in the way we probably would if we knew ourselves surrounded by an unfamiliar language and culture.

The book is funny, provocative, friendly, and always interesting. In relatively few pages, Orr gives a brief summary of poetry's relationship with itself, its practitioners and society. He shares some very funny (and human) stories of poets' maliciousness/envy/fear and movingly conveys (as he sees it) their often lonely, self-doubting lives. And as promised, he shares his experience both personal and professional with his relationship with poetry.

Orr describes poetry as a "small, vulnerable activity," but also points out that human life consists of many "small, unnecessary acts of devotions." I found myself taking many notes, partly for the pleasure of repeating his succinct, lovely phrases and partly to argue with him.

Because at the risk of repeating the hyperbole he accuses lovers of poetry of indulging in, I would say that poetry fills a particular need, opens up worlds inside us and in our relationship with the world around us in a way unique to it. And I would say music, painting, theater, sculpture, all do the same, each in their own way. And a world deprived of these special relationships is a world that is flatter. And each art may not speak to each person in equally powerful ways but I would argue that developing an understanding of any (and all) of the arts increases our humanity and benefits us and the world.

Jim Coughenour says

Beautiful & Pointless opens with the amusing (if not especially interesting) observation that "For decades now, one of the poetry world's favorite activities has been bemoaning its lost audience, then bemoaning the bemoaning, then bemoaning that bemoaning, until finally everyone shrugs and applies for a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts." Instead, Orr commits himself to 200 pages of stalwart, determinedly phlegmatic *un-moaning*, steady-breathing his way to the common sense conclusion that "Poetry is a small, vulnerable human activity no better or more powerful than thousands of other small, vulnerable human activities." Well, sure, I suppose so.

His last chapter is titled *why bother?* and indeed I wondered why he did.

Orr's book isn't by any stretch "a guide to poetry." I have a small shelf of these, ranging from intelligent, friendly introductions by Alfred Corn, Mary Oliver, Mark Strand, to more serious tomes by James Fenton, and the Guide of all Guides by Mary Kinzie. Orr more or less ignores all learning, preferring to chat instead about the sociopolitical foibles of poets trying to impress the 10 other poets who might have heard of them. Late in the book he refers to "the purplish language" of Edward Hirsch's *How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry* with a light touch of mockery – which made me shrug in turn; I remember reading Hirsch's book when it appeared a dozen years back and thoroughly enjoying his passion for poets and poems, some of whom were new to me and have stayed with me since. He did not mention Camille Paglia's *Break, Blow, Burn* – I'm surprised, it seems tailor-made for his alleged iconoclastic wit – but (again) I found much to celebrate in Paglia's book too, an eclectic assortment of poems passionately championed for whatever radioactive half-life of an idea she had at the time.

Orr misses the point that people love poems, not Poetry.

Sarah Wells says

I just finished *Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry* by David Orr, and now I am sad. It isn't often that I come across a person who cares so much about poetry but is equally as honest about the state of contemporary poetry, and that willingness to illuminate the reality of modern poetry and call it like it is was refreshing, humbling, and entertaining. I'm not sad because of his honesty or the bleak portrait of modern poetry. I'm sad because he was light, funny, and accessible, and now it is over, and now I must go back to actually reading contemporary poetry (ha ha ha).

Y'all know that I love poetry (really, I love poetry, not just like). I come to poetry mostly from Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein and the simple pleasure of the way words felt in my mouth as I learned to read. The music of poetry and the written word is unlike lyrics in that the rhythm resides solely in the words-- it cannot be buttressed by notes and chords, by percussion or strings. That's where my love of poetry starts-- in play and in joy. Plus, I am tone deaf, and while I will sing (badly), singing is a distinctly different kind of pleasure that involves high notes, low notes and all that fall between, while one focus of poetry is on the way the words rub up against each other, in stresses and unstressed syllables, in alliterations and rhyme. It sings without vocal range (thank God for that).

Next I find the poems I like most offer a magnified glimpse. At something. Anything, really. Like a photographer, the poet zooms in and says, look what I found. Or, listen to this experience I had once. Or, doesn't this remind you of this other thing? I love the metaphor. I love the hidden truth revealed. I love the "ah ha!" moment when I discover what the writer discovered, and I love to be on the writing end of that "ah ha!" moment, experiencing the surprise, too. I like poems that invite me over for a cup of tea.

But I also like poems with depth and feeling, poems that struggle with questions-- big and little ones--poems that make demands, poems that are so personal they fold in on themselves and become universal. I love poems rich in detail and rooted in scene. I love storytelling and narrative, form and freeverse. I even love the poems that require several run-throughs before the meaning reveals itself, if at all, poems with complex syntax that I have to cut into small pieces and digest slowly before I have any idea what's really going on

besides initial awe.

So these are some of the reasons why I love poetry. What is brilliant about *Beautiful & Pointless* is that Orr does not set out to defend poetry as the Art of Arts. He shares with the reader a panoramic shot of the world of modern poetry, and he nails it, all of it-- the ego, the rubbing of elbows, the academic world, the private world, the public poet, the business of endorsements, the poem about the poem, and, most importantly, the reality that is so often forgotten in poetic circles, the fact that all of the people who actually read and value poetry could comfortably fit into one large athletic complex.

This reality, for me, isn't discouraging. There are plenty of niche groups in the world who are passionate about interests I have no desire to pursue (i.e., Star Trek. Basket Weaving. Hot Air Ballooning. Rowing. Etc.), and none of them are bemoaning the state of the world, the general neglect of their Art, or why collecting stamps hasn't entered the realm of popular culture.

At the end of the century, maybe a dozen dead poets will find their work in the Norton Anthology tortured college freshman will read and be confused by. The likelihood that I am one of those dead poets by 2100 is pretty, pretty slim (the likelihood that I AM a dead poet by 2100 is almost guaranteed, unless I live to be 118), SO, I think I will write whatever the heck I want to write, however the heck I want to write it, and I better darn well have a good time doing it, because chances are me and a handful of my closest friends and family will read the things, and then just two or three will actually care, so if I'm not having fun along the way, then why, why keep it up?

I love poetry.

Read *Beautiful & Pointless: A Guide to Modern Poetry* by David Orr. You might not walk away wanting to jump into the latest issue of Poetry Magazine or jump online to order a subscription for Rattle, but you will have a fresh perspective on the wild and crazy world of the contemporary poet, you will laugh a little-- mostly at yourself, if you are a poet.

Ken says

Great title. (Check out the parenthesis with "A Guide to Modern Poetry" inside of it.) Dangerous title. (Check out the risk that it, too, may be as pointless as its subject matter.)

Anyway, you could call it a strength or a weakness that this book about poetry is not by a poet but by a poetry critic (they have such things, but I wouldn't advise wanting to be one when you grow up). David Orr carries such a title for the *New York Times Book Review*, no small change for a kid from South Carolina who cut his teeth on Philip Larkin's poetry (Phil was David's inspiration to become a lifelong poetry reader, an irony only Philip could appreciate more than David).

Intriguing to me was the claim that this was a book for Everyman as opposed to poetry readers (1% of the population) and poets (.12839% of the population). Being a teacher, I can only partially claim the "poetry reader" designation, and having written a couple dozen poems, only four published, I can only partially claim the "poet" designation, too. My best fit? Everyman behaving a little strangely, maybe.*

But nothing in here especially appealed to the populist in me. To start, Orr dissects what it means to be a poet, and what poetry is, and, scalpel, please, I'm not sure Everyman wants to don the surgeon's mask to

witness this, really. Then Orr discusses greatness under the cloak of "ambition" -- what makes poetry great, and what poets ARE great. But wait -- if you're Everyman considering poetry for the first time, what's this to you? Isn't it like insider's jargon with insider's names? Then we get the "Form" chapter which (gasp) gets into the architecture of poetry. Hoo boy. Most people don't care how a car works or what's under the hood, they just want it to start when they turn the ignition key and get them safely from A to B when they press the gas pedal. Similarly, most non-poets and non-poetry readers do not want to get into the guts of, say, sonnets, they just want to read it and sigh if it hits them in the sweet spot.

Finally, the most niche-driven chapter of all, "Fishbowl." Here Orr got into the debate of poetry belonging to the outsider/Lone Wolf as opposed to belonging to that new poetic beast, the product of academia endorsed and perpetuated by OTHER products of academia. Poetry workshops. Blurbs. You love my chapbook and I'll love yours. Et cetera with enjambment.

I loved the closing of the book, however. In it, Orr recounts his younger days, how he met poetry (it wasn't on-line!), and how he and his dying father shared poetry even though his dad, like most of our dads, wouldn't know poetry if he tripped over it. Great stuff, and a great closing line.

Which is odd, really, because I read so many good books that don't know how to end, yet here I read a so-so book of criticism that not only knows it but nails it. So let that be your incentive (or not). If you love poetry, you MAY love this book. Or not. Damned if I know. You're on your own, kind of like white chickens in the rain when they strut by red wheelbarrows....

* Since writing this, I have actually published a debut collection of 80 (count 'em) poems in a book called The Indifferent World. Life plays strange tricks, no?

Ted Burke says

David Orr is a smart writer and poet who has taken on the task to add yet another apology regarding poetry and its under the radar status with most readers, yet another attempt to make the craft less off-putting to a larger audience. It is an enjoyable book , but the joining of poet and readership is not something that can be accomplished by easy suggestions ; as usual, I adhere to the pragmatist dictum that the value of any theory is in how it works, which means, to paraphrase, the allure of any poem, in any style, of any theory, of any agenda composed in English, resides mostly with the talent of the individual poet. We get into matters about how well the poet has absorbed and assimilated their readings, ie, "made them his/her own", how broadly they've outgrown their influences and progressed toward their own version of originality and genius, of course. At the end of the day and long into the night and the following morning, what draws a reader to a poet again after a first reading was the quality of the stanzas, the line breaks, the stylization of the verbs and the spare placement of the adjectives, the use of imagery that seemed both unique and yet plausible, the use of metaphor that is delivered smoothly, invisibly, musically. It is, I think, less a matter on whether a poet opts for simpler diction and terse couplets in regimented rhyme schemes, or a shambling flow that winds through so many associative canyon highways before coming to something resembling a poetic effect; poets are not unlike jazz improvisers of the language, which is to say that how ever they choose to address a problem they've assigned themselves, it comes down to if the writer has developed a style that has an elegance that adheres to and extends the dictates of their chosen form, if the poems in question have their activity placed in the world the poet is nominally apart of, and if this is accomplished with the least amount of pretentious self-awareness. This is to say that what makes a poem an attractive item to return to again and

to ruminate about depends on the skill the poet can forget the prevailing nonsense that "poems are always read in the context of other poems" and get on with their task of fathoming more interesting mysteries, oddities, paradoxes and alluvial epiphanies the experience of being alive, breathing and seeing brings us. There is nothing wrong with living in your head, *per se*, but even poets need to stop watching the dust gather on the furniture and go for a walk, a drive, a movie, a date.

Diane Kistner says

If "Beautiful & Pointless" really was intended to provide "a riveting tour of poetry as it actually exists today" for an audience of non-poetry readers, I would be giving this book one star for further driving away that other "98% of the population" that doesn't read poetry. I'm rating it more highly as a mirror that the SUBSET of poets Orr writes about here--many (but not all) of the academics and their progeny--can hold up to their own faces to help them figure out why almost nobody bothers to read what they write. What Orr tells us is true, but only as far as it goes. A huge amount of poetry is being published now outside of the universities, and I'm not talking about just the newest wave of self-publishing print-on-demand poets. I've been active in the small press movement since the early seventies, and a considerable amount of fresh, vibrant work is being published by independent publishers.

Orr gives the impression that academics are the only ones writing poetry today. This is just not the case. Some of the best poetry being written now is by poets who manage to rise above or work outside of academia. As a non-academic, I can see along with the rest of the 98% that it's pretty pointless to read poetry written by poets who have their heads up their own you-know-whats all the time (as a number of poets Orr chooses to highlight clearly do)--because WHO CARES what they see in there? I maintain that even their fellow academicians don't care. The Plato's cave-like glimpses of modern poetry presented in this book left me shaking my head, saying "No wonder nobody buys poetry books anymore." If we are to judge the state of modern poetry strictly by what's being churned out of MFA programs, a considerable amount of engaging work written by quite talented poets will be swept under the rug of history. This is not to say that good work is not being done within the crucible of the university, but too much of it is stilted, tired, self-absorbed--completely out of touch with the rest of the world.

Here's my two cents: To be worth reading, a poem must transcend the poet who writes it, must have depth and a life of its own; and it must somehow transmit that life, that connection, to the reader. What the non-poetry reading audience needs to know is not how much poetry today is written out of pettiness, myopia, or solipsism—which renders it not only pointless but deadly boring—but that poetry can shake them and wake them and take them places they've never been before. In this regard, Orr's metaphor early on in the book of traveling to a strange country is a good one. But the strange country he takes us to in the better part of the book is more like Rome with its overabundance of cats digging through dumpsters full of stinking old wine bottles than it is the Belgian countryside. Sure, there are Berninis to be glimpsed around the next corner—watch out for the slop bucket tossed out of that upper-story window!—but Orr does not show the non-poetry reader any Berninis.

I took four college-level creative writing classes about forty years ago, learning metrics, sound and sense. I fell in love with poetry (Dickey being the first to blow me away); wrote a few good poems; won a few nice literary prizes; started a small poetry press or two; and fell in love with and married a poet whose poetry blew me away. The poems I love are well-crafted, yes, but they are not Empsonian exercises in multi-dimensional navel-gazing. They have a whiff about them of timelessness and universality that anyone—anyone who reads deeply—can "get." The poetry I want to read snatches me up—on many

levels—and refuses to let go. Sometimes a poem is so good that I have to memorize it before I can put the book down and do something else. Of course, ugliness can be beautiful and a poem about pointlessness can make a point, but many of the poems Orr chooses to present to us largely fail on both counts.

As is true of any reader, I am biased and prone to my own pettiness that arises from my own experience: After all these years, DH and I still run a small literary press and have published some exceptional poets and volumes of poetry. Only a few of these forty years have been spent in academia, and some of the best poets we have published are not academics. But if "Beautiful & Pointless" is to be believed, we and the poets we publish don't even exist. That the only poets getting any attention from reviewers are those doing the academic bump and grind is, sadly, why poetry is not appreciated by a larger audience.

David Orr needs to get out more!

The Sunday Book Review says

You want to see modern day poets called out for their bad poetry? Pick up this book. The first one to get a lashing in Jewel. David Orr complains that while the book did very well in sales, the poetry is such drivel that it's embarrassing. And it just gets worse from there.

I like poetry. Granted I am picky in what I like, but I don't think I would go as far as saying what I don't like is worthless. In this book we are given a short study on how to distinguish good poetry from bad poetry. How to distinguish poetry with feeling versus poetry for the sake of writing words down.

The book was fun to read, partly because it just ripped some modern day poets to shreds but also because I liked his "explanations" of it. The reason I put that in quotes is because at times he just quickly says it's garbage and moves on. I think the book would have been more effective in telling it from his perspective and telling us the why. He is a knowledgeable man in poetry and sometimes the book read a bit elitist. "Don't you know why this is crap? Why should I even bother explaining it to you?"

Even through some of his descriptions you can start understanding more about what modern day poets try to accomplish. If you are a poet or heavily read poetry, this is an interesting book to pick up. You may not agree with most of what he says, but it will give you an inside view as to what critics look for in poetry nowadays and how to avoid the pitfalls they all dread.

I must say the younger version of me was a bit let down. Poetry shouldn't be so difficult. It should be what calls out to YOU, not a critic. Something that is personal to you, may not be to someone else, and to have that person tell you your poetry is bad, kind of hurts. To his credit, Orr covers this in his book. He writes about how shocked people are when they hear that he rips apart people's written emotions. But like he says, we review all other types of written words, why not poetry?

The book was a quick, funny illuminating read. Would I take everything he said to heart. No. But I'll be sure to write about it in my next poem.

Scott says

Orr is the poetry critic for the New York Times. This meandering, stream-of-consciousness contemplation can be charming or witty in spots, but I don't think it has facilitated or enhanced my enjoyment of modern poetry much. Who is it aimed at, I wonder?

Therese Broderick says

"So please: Disagree with me." If Mr. Orr had not written that plea in his Introduction to this book, I might not have commented here.

But before I disagree, I will agree: Mr. Orr, I agree with you that poetry lovers "Probably ... just like the way it sounds" (page 11) and that the affection your father had for the sound and silliness of "The Owl and the Pussycat" is a good thing, both beautiful and far from pointless. I also agree that poetry is a "small, vulnerable human activity" (page 192). Years ago, I fell in love with poetry that was small and vulnerable.

Now, I will disagree with one approach of your book: its mischaracterization of the average American poet in the year 2011. The source of that mischaracterization is the book's neglect of the vibrant, young, diverse, inventive, exciting, and globalized poetry culture of the Internet, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. Only once in your book's 194 pages of text is email mentioned. Only once is Google, a website (Poetry.com), or a blog (The Dread Schenectady) mentioned.

Despite my one major disagreement, I agree with enough of the observations, wisdom, and good-naturedness in this book that I will recommend it to my poetry friends. Most likely, I will recommend it to my online poetry friends via the Internet, Facebook, and email. And Goodreads.

Eli says

A book with an apropos title: I'm not sure how much I'd say I learned from these essays (they tend to avoid statements that could be called sweeping), but they are lovely, and I admire their thoughtful nature and candid humor.

Mary Ronan Drew says

David Orr, the poetry critic for the NY Times, tells of meeting a woman at a party and when she asked the question we all ask of new people these days, "What do you do?" he said, "I'm a poetry critic."

"Oh! How can you do that? Poetry is so . . . so PERSONAL."

And so Orr begins his slim book by addressing the question of just how personal modern confessional poetry really is. Writing about one's misery and disappointment and personal failings can start to sound the same when everyone is doing it, and not very cleverly at that. But one of the most personal poems he knows, says Orr, is John O'Hara's "The Day Lady Died," and especially the last few lines:

"... I just stroll into the PARK LANE
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

"and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT
while she whispered a song along the keyboard
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing"

It made me stop breathing for a moment.

Orr quotes from dozens of modern poets and has an entertaining chapter about the formalists, one of whom includes in his book of sonnets a 14-line poem with one word per line. Is it a sonnet? I think it is and I loved it as I did all of these essays.

Arief Bakhtiar D. says

Stuart says

The closing sentence of the Introduction says it best: "The point is to allow you to find your own place in the poetry world, where others can come and visit." My relationship with the poetry world has been until now been unexamined and ill-defined: I have read poems required in school and various other poems, I have composed doggerel and haiku for friends, I have friends who love poetry and friends who hate poetry -- but I never fit those pieces together in frameworks that made sense for me. Now, thanks to Orr, I feel comfortable with a few frameworks that work for me and trying on other frameworks. A few parts of Orr's book are belabored, a few of his arguments seem wrong in my opinion, and he ignores a few poets I like; but having worked through the discussion with him has been helpful. The journey has also been easy and fun, because he moves easily and productively across a broad range of scholarly analysis and everyday, often funny, examples.
