



Why Poetry

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An impassioned call for a return to reading poetry and an incisive argument for poetry's accessibility to all readers, by critically acclaimed poet Matthew Zapruder

In Why Poetry, award-winning poet Matthew Zapruder takes on what it is that poetry—and poetry alone—can do. Zapruder argues that the way we have been taught to read poetry is the very thing that prevents us from enjoying it. In lively, lilting prose, he shows us how that misunderstanding interferes with our direct experience of poetry and creates the sense of confusion or inadequacy that many of us feel when faced with it.

Zapruder explores what poems are, and how we can read them, so that we can, as Whitman wrote, “possess the origin of all poems,” without the aid of any teacher or expert. Most important, he asks how reading poetry can help us to lead our lives with greater meaning and purpose.

Anchored in poetic analysis and steered through Zapruder’s personal experience of coming to the form, Why Poetry is engaging and conversational, even as it makes a passionate argument for the necessity of poetry in an age when information is constantly being mistaken for knowledge. While he provides a simple reading method for approaching poems and illuminates concepts like associative movement, metaphor, and negative capability, Zapruder explicitly confronts the obstacles that readers face when they encounter poetry to show us that poetry can be read, and enjoyed, by anyone.

Why Poetry Details

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From Reader Review Why Poetry for online ebook

Deb (Readerbuzz) Nance says

If you have to ask this question, you probably aren't interested in reading this book.

And if you are simply curious as to the answer to this question, you might be able to write a better book.

Frank Mundo says

I liked this book in a lot of ways -- a couple are the author's story of how he found poetry and it became essential to his life -- and the author's "defense" of poetry. The chapter he explicated some famous poems is also very engaging and beautifully and thoughtfully done. A lot of it is complete BS, in my opinion, but it's 4-star BS and worth reading because Zapruder, a successful poet, serves as an excellent "defense" attorney for the subject of poetry.

The problem for me, however, is this: the book is described as "an impassioned call for a return to reading poetry and an incisive argument for poetry's accessibility to all readers." This book, however, won't be read (at least not all the way to the end) by people who don't like poetry or find it inaccessible. Why would they? This book is for poets and poetry lovers and the legions of MFA students and academics who have to explain their poetry to family and friends who think writing it, let alone reading it, is a waste of time. And, in that way, it's not a defense of poetry's accessibility to all readers. It's a justification for poets writing inaccessible poetry. After all, it's the reader (not the poets), Zapruder says, that needs to change, to relearn everything, from how to read poetry, to accepting the confusing and embracing the paradoxical and uncomfortable feelings that can come along with it. It's the readers fault it's hard to read -- but that's because they were not taught to read properly in school. I'm sure that's not what people who have trouble understanding poetry want to hear. It's exactly what they thought all along since they hated reading it in school -- it's their fault, not the writer's.

Another thing that bothers me is offering up Keats and Shakespeare and Whitman and all these great dead poets as examples. These are the same poets who are the reason most readers got turned off of poetry in school in the first place -- because it wasn't accessible and made them feel dumb for not "getting it." Zapruder further wants the readers to accept that meaning may not be found in poetry. There's nothing to get (except the-nothing-to-get-ness, which should be embraced). I just think, if a person not interested in poetry hears this argument (or justification), it's not going to fly. Why not use some poems right out of today's publications, which would have no interest in publishing Shakespeare and Keats were they alive today. Why? And this is the problem: Because the poems published today in the New Yorker and other top journals are just as difficult and inaccessible to readers without experience, knowledge and the love for poetry.

Again, the writing in Why Poetry is truly wonderful, the concept is commendable, it's engaging and written simply and confidently, and there is so much here to enjoy -- if you love poetry, write poetry, teach poetry, study poetry or if, like the author, poetry is already essential to your life.

Rachel Skye says

First semester and first year grad student and this book was SO helpful. I loved it. I loved Zapruder's take on poetry and what it means to be a writer and poet. Definitely want to go back and read this cover to cover.

Raeche1 says

This book took me a long time to get through. I read it very slowly because I don't "get" poetry. A lot of the problems I have with it are covered by the author. There's plenty of example poems that Zapruder walks the reader through to help them understand *how* to read a poem better. It was very helpful, although I wouldn't say I am completely confident in my ability to understand poetry now. But I do plan to read more poetry to practice my new poetry-reading skills now that I've finished this book.

Emily says

What a beautiful little book. I'll admit, poetry has frequently intimidated me. Even poems that I love, I have often felt that I didn't really understand them. This book helped me to realize that I do in fact, "get" poetry. That it isn't beyond me. It is also inspiring me to write poetry again...something I haven't done in 20 years.

Rebecca says

Like Ben Lerner's *The Hatred of Poetry*, this aims to refute the widespread belief that poetry is difficult and based on a hidden meaning that must be unearthed. Instead, Zapruder argues, it's about the reader making their own connections in a sort of dreamlike state, such that the rhyming might not (just) be between sounds but between concepts you hadn't thought to link before. He talks about form and content, and gives plenty of examples, mostly from American poetry—ranging from Whitman and Dickinson to Ashbery, Bishop and Stevens. Although I think this is more likely to appeal to people who already read and love poetry than it is to make new converts, it's a convincing extended essay as well as a good introduction to the breadth of twentieth-century poetry.

Petr Mezihorak says

Zpo?átku možná p?íliš sebest?edná, postupn? ale ?ím dál št?d?ejší kniha. O básních jako o otázkách (?asto velmi intuitivn? formulovaných), nikoliv jako o odpov?dích. O hodnot? pozornosti, ticha, vzdálených asociací, toho bílého "ni?eho" okolo slov, nás, v nás, proto, abyhom dokázali vnímat blízkost jiných lidí.

Jsavett1 says

Matthew Zapruder's book of poetry *Come On All You Ghosts* is one of my favorites. His work is associative,

surreal, fun, smart, blue.

This book is amazing. As an English teacher and poet, it spoke to me on many levels. I plan on using excerpts for my AP Literature class this Fall. Zapruder artfully and convincingly breaks down presuppositions that many have about poetry and then teaches the reader about how he doesn't need to teach the reader how to love poetry.

Most importantly, for me, is Zapruder's argument/belief that poetry is not one of life's accessories or ornaments. Poets are not to be wheeled out at inaugurations and national tragedies. Poets and poetry give us an alternative and ESSENTIAL headspace free from the utilitarian, capitalist, banal use of language and the commodification of everything in our world. Poetry is the anti-Trump. It lets us bask in ambiguity, in complexity, it lets us FEEL what it FEELS like to know it's okay to not know.

If you have ANY interest in starting to read poetry OR you are an English educator, this book is a must.

Ellie says

I loved this book so much I put it down for a week six pages before the end so that I wouldn't have to be finished with it! Zapruder's work is beautifully written, enjoyable just for the pleasure of its prose, but it also is a helpful guide to enjoying poetry. Also, it is a powerful pitch for the preciousness of poetry as a creator of an imaginative space that we need in which to bridge the differences between us. Never has a healing space like this been more needed than today. This is a lovely response to the question, Why Poetry? Because we need it to expand our lives, our hearts, our imagination, and our lives.

Joan Colby says

There are contradictions in Zapruder's ideas which he would, I imagine, be the first to admit. He posits that poetry is available to everyone, but poetry isn't easy, it makes demands to which only those with a dedication to the word would submit. The poems the general reader likes and understands without needing to reference a body of knowledge are those that are either rank with the appeal of sentiment or deceptively transparent as much of Frost pretends to be. While Zapruder laments the close readings and reductionist practices that he says make students hate poetry, he employs these very techniques to examine many of the poems he uses as examples. The academic approach continues to govern not the comprehension of poetry so much as its architecture. If an author retreats to Emily's "body turned cold" way of experiencing the validity of a poem, then he has a very brief book, if he has one at all. So when as Zapruder does here, you look at the ways poetry works, you end up writing a manual, and like all such tracts, it verges into instruction and the mechanics of construction—things the casual reader, the one who claims to hate poetry, would dismiss as being outside his area of interest—and rightly so. As a car owner, you may wish to simply enjoy driving or the usefulness of how this transportation gets you places you need to go. You don't necessarily want to learn the workings of the engine or how the computerized console evolved. The same with poetry. Zapruder would do better admitting these are essays for the poetic adventurer—the serious reader that he himself evolved into, though like many such, he didn't have an initial grounding in semantics—though maybe as a Russian language major, he actually did. To be honest, I wanted to enjoy this book more than I do. It's too reminiscent of so much academic writing about poetry by better critics like Tony Hoagland or Helen Vendler. Further, Zapruder has a tendency to wax over-enthusiastic about how poetry enriches a life. Of

course it can, but so do many of the related arts. The short story can equal poetry in offering an epiphany that can be life changing and can also be as subtle and mysterious as any poem. Using Ashbery to illustrate close reading—an academic activity—but not one likely to convince the average reader of the need to add poetry to his reading list, is an error. Make no mistake, this is an informed book for the working poet, but I think the way it is being sold to non-specialists is more than a little misleading.

Kenny Chaffin says

I love the "Poetry for the People" attitude and the argument that the only reason people shy away from poetry is because it is being taught completely wrong. Zapruder goes through chapter after chapter explaining this - the meanings, the reason, the metaphors, the reality of poetry and does it simply and wonderfully. My only wish is that he would have included many more contemporary poets and examples of their poetry -- there are so many wonderful ones - Billy Collins, Ted Koozer, Dorianne Laux, Li-Young Lee, David Shumate, Yusef Komunyakaa, Tony Hoagland, hell even my favorite Jane Kenyon! And many even newer amazing poets I'm just discovering.

Ken says

Defining poetry is a thankless job, but Matthew Zapruder, given 226 pages, pulls it off with aplomb. Leavened throughout are example poems and his own thoughts on them, as well as a little bit of memoirish recollection of his experiences as a poet, a student of poetry, and a teacher of poetry.

You might add "Matters" to the title and be just as satisfied. It's one man's try at the riddle. It does, but WHY it does, is not so easy to wrangle with.

So far I've riffed not once but FOUR TIMES on parts of this book. If you want to go deep (as in the Hail Mary route), here are the links, the first on the only tool you'll need to "get" poetry (per Zapruder), the second on how poets make the ordinary "strange," the third on what we mean by poetry readers getting "joyfully ambushed," and the last on John Keats' famous endorsement of "negative capability" in poetry:

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Laura says

There were a hundred bright spots in this eloquent book: beautiful, essential quotes about poetry from the greatest poets themselves. These were a shortcut straight to the heart of poetry. There were other bright spots of Zapruder's own clear explanations of the mysterious power of poetry. It's just that as a whole, it failed to carry the reader along with elegance and enthusiasm, and failed to provide much in the way of a conclusion

at the end.

For a truly elegant book on poetry that is as poetic, moving, and inspired as the poem it contains, read *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination*. It is the best book defending and explaining poetry that I have ever read (and, what's more, it includes poems from all eras, not just contemporary poetry.)

Nonetheless, I flagged a hundred bright spots to keep as treasured quotes from Zaprunder's work and I truly benefitted from my time in his company. He gave a lot of courage to an aspiring amateur poet, and for that I am grateful. I loved how he embraced the mysterious machinery of poetry but still took care to explain to those who are less wise to its ways. But to claim that your books explains "why poetry" exists and is useful, then to end with such a nihilistic understanding of the universe was a real let-down, and the book didn't carry me with its own momentum so much as I forced myself to keep trudging through it in the hopes of encountering more bright spots of insight from Zaprunder and his many favorite thinkers.

Julie Ehlers says

Why Poetry is the book I'd been hoping *Poetry Will Save Your Life* would be. The more poetry I read, the more curious I get about how it works, and I'm happy to say this book provided some answers. Among the many interesting points Zaprunder makes, he maintains that the most crucial thing about poetry is the connections it makes. These can be connections of theme, of language, of sound—but the connections are what makes a text poetry and not just prose broken up into short lines (sorry, Rupi Kaur). Zaprunder uses some great poems to illustrate this point, and he does the same to address one of his other main points, which is that good poetry is accessible. Sure, it may have more sophisticated language than some prose does, but it's generally not hard to understand. Most memorably, Zaprunder explicates a few lines of "The Wasteland"—a poem people tend to point to when they claim poetry is pretentious and impenetrable. Zaprunder convincingly shows that not only is "The Wasteland" a beautiful poem and a masterpiece, it's honestly not that hard to figure out. As a reader of poetry and someone who wishes more people read poetry, I appreciated this more than I can say.

In addition to teaching me a lot about poetry, *Why Poetry* also introduced me to some great poets and poems I wasn't familiar with. It also had some fascinating memoir elements; not enough to distract from the main purpose of the book, but enough to entertain me and keep me wanting more. I loved pretty much every page of *Why Poetry*. I know there are some readers who are determined to see poetry as inaccessible, and those readers will probably decide *Why Poetry* is similarly difficult to read. But if you're curious about poetry and have an open mind, why not check out *Why Poetry*?

Ally says

Recently, collections like Patricia Lockwood's *MOTHERLAND FATHERLAND HOMELANDSEXUALS*, Juan Felipe Herrera's *NOTES ON THE ASSEMBLAGE, SPRING AND ALL* by William Carlos Williams, *THE AFTER PARTY* by Jana Prikryl, and Najwan Darwish's *NOTHING MORE TO LOSE* have challenged my poetry-reading skills. They play with forms, subject matter, and style to such a degree that, at times, I felt like the poetry was "too smart" for me, or that I just didn't "get it". This shouldn't be the case, but I know that it was mostly due to the poor poetry studies in my youth. So, I was genuinely pleased when I found *WHY POETRY*, by Matthew Zaprunder.

Zapruder is an award-winning poet, teacher, and general Johnny Appleseed of poetry. In his book, he is on a mission to spread the love of poetry through an increased understanding of its aims, forms, styles, and other major components. He is most interested in investigating how great poetry uses language to create a poetic state of mind in the reader. As a young child, he was enraptured by poems like Henry Wordsworth Longfellow's "The Song of Hiawatha" and W.H. Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" but never seriously considered poetry as a career path until he had almost finished a PhD in Russian. So, he understands his students' apprehension or disinterest in poetry, but is full of techniques and insights that he shares in **WHY POETRY**. Each chapter features a different component of poetry that he wants to communicate, then he provides some personal anecdotes or historical facts surrounding its use, and then breaks down a few poems, or fragments of large poems, to illustrate how that component was utilized. This analysis is something I found most helpful, especially when it comes to matters of form, which is the area in which I feel the most uncertain.

In the first chapter, Zapruder brings the reader into his history and early experiences with poetry. He analyzes a fragment of Auden's "Musee des Beaux Arts" and talks about how reading that poem was a watershed moment for him. At the time, he didn't understand exactly why he connected so much with the poem, but over time and re-reads, as well as with his growing education in poetry, he was able to talk more coherently and specifically about what Auden was doing in the work, and why it was so engaging.

Chapter 2 talks about one of the most important parts of poetry, really of language itself - the use of words. The author emphasizes that readers of poetry should take the poet's words at face value, at least initially. Think about why the poet chose the words that she/he did, and all the possible literal meanings those words might have. Sometimes this takes a little dictionary/internet research, but if it enhances your understanding and appreciation of the poem, then it's time well spent. Chapter 3 builds on this topic, with the author deeply analyzing a portion of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself", Wallace Stevens' "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon", and a section of Brenda Hillman's "Death Tractates". Most of the language is used literally, and any figurative associations are coincidental to the main idea of the poem. It's only through close and thorough review, guided here by Zapruder, that you can begin to see significant examples of non-figurative language used to great poetic effect.

The fourth chapter moves into the more figurative and less straightforward aspects of poetry. Once you have a good grasp on how to read the literality of poetry, you're ready to move into the odd. As a student of the Russian language, the author references a not-easily-translatable Russian word "ostraneniye" which means something like "defamiliarization" or (my personal favorite) "strangeifying". This is in contrast to those aspects of daily life we go about in almost a robotic fashion, where everything is habitual and routine. Poets strangeify the world through paying attention to those things, and not letting them become too automatic, and seeing them in ways the rest of us might not expect. In this chapter, the author looks at the poems "Suicide's Note" by Langston Hughes, an unnamed poem of Emily Dickinson, and Antonia Machado's "At a Friend's Burial".

Chapter 5 looks at how poems are structured, and some of the reasoning for using a rhyming scheme or not. The author, early in his poetry-writing life, bought one of those massive **THE NORTON ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY** collections, and discusses what the experience was like of reading it. For him, it felt that the act of writing poetry "can be a kind of seemingly impossible communion, with someone far away in time and space" which is kind of a beautiful thing to think about. Even after the poet is long gone, if her/his poetry speaks to something that means something to someone, it's like that poet is living on in concert with the reader. One of the poems that Zapruder dissects is William Carlos Williams' short, untitled poem about the "red wheel barrow". The author writes that "The line breaks and filmic way this ordinary scene is parceled out to our consciousness by the mechanism of the poem slows us down long enough for us to see once again

what has become too familiar. That is the 'message' of the poem"; it's such a complicated yet simple work, because there is nothing of significance, but in the end everything is of significance because it is noticed. He also talks about how it is far less common for modern day poets to work in a rhyming structure, partially because it feels quaint and outdated, and partially because it affects the emotions and perceptions of the reader in ways the poet might not intend.

The sixth chapter focuses on the frustrations that many readers have with trying to "get" the meaning or intention of poems. Chapter 7 examines the tendency of modern poetry to jump around seemingly at any moment and without cause but, upon reflection and analysis, those jumps might not be so random at all. It's also highly unlikely that poems have only one specific message to convey. As the author writes, "the poem places us in a state of heightened importance, with a sense that everything matters intensely at the moment it is being experienced". Internal consistency isn't of much importance across the entirety of the poem, as long as the essence of the work is so. Neither are the other conventions of literature, such as plot, logic, characters, settings, etc. These are of only slight interest to the poet. With poetry, embrace the strangeness.

Chapter 8 explores the subsection of poetry that focuses on politics and/or political themes. The author contends that, if you are a person who cares deeply about issues like gender, the economy, race, and environment, then the poetry you write, if you allow it to flow naturally onto the page, those topics will find themselves in your poetry without having to try to hard to fit them in. Because the political world is almost always a strange place, poets should not be afraid to defamiliarize terms that politicians regularly toss around, in their work.

Chapter 9 extends the author's analysis and explanation around the "jumping" that can happen in poetry. In particular interest is poetry that reads almost like stream of consciousness or dreams in that there are tenuous or thin threads connecting the poem's content from one line to the next, but over the entirety of the work there is seemingly nothing in common - called "associative movement". The author uses Robert Hass' poem "Meditation at Lagunitas" to explore this kind of poetic movement.

The tenth and eleventh chapters dive deeply into the use of symbolic language in poetry, and the different occasions where one might choose to employ it or not. Chapter 12 shares in the author's coming to realize that just as clay is a medium for a sculptor, or watercolors are for a painter, that words and language are the medium in which a poet works.

The thirteenth and final chapter explores the ways that poetry moves and changes us, sometimes without us being able to articulate exactly why or how it happens. The author explains that, "a poem is like a person. the more you know someone, the more you realize there is always something more to know and understand". So that sense of not quite understanding a poem just means that there is more and more to come back to and make meaning and connection.

As someone who has read some poetry and wondered what the heck was happening, or if I just wasn't smart enough to understand it, I found WHY POETRY extremely comforting and helpful. It's a crash course in poetics, led by a professor who is kind, knowledgeable, and funny. I feel more of a sense of confidence in now when I read poetry collections, that however I'm feeling is appropriate and valuable. It also instilled a deeper sense of analysis that will allow me to see more deeply into some of the constructs and construction of poetry. If you are interested in trying some poetry reading of your own, but have a bad taste in your mouth from poetry lessons in your school days, I would highly recommend giving Matthew Zapruder's WHY POETRY a try.
