



MARK DOTY

The Art of Description: World into Word

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"It sounds like a simple thing, to say what you see," Mark Doty begins. "But try to find words for the shades of a mottled sassafras leaf, or the reflectivity of a bay on an August morning, or the very beginnings of desire stirring in the gaze of someone looking right into your eyes . . ." Doty finds refuge in the sensory experience found in poems by Blake, Whitman, Bishop, and others. *The Art of Description* is an invaluable book by one of America's most revered writers and teachers.

The Art of Description: World into Word Details

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Author : Mark Doty

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Bruce says

Being that it's written by a poet, this book is not the brick and mortar on the topic one finds in a book like Rebecca McClanahan's "Word Painting." Doty starts by admitting the hopelessness of the task of describing description, then embarks on something more like a meditation, presenting and unpacking example after example, insighting and enlightening and in the end, instructing more by injecting a sense of it into the brain than by laying out any step-by-step. A curious twist is the chapter titled "Four Sunflowers." Looking at the table of contents, one thinks, "Oh god, he's going to use his own poem (the magnificent "Four Sunflowers, One Upside Down") as example!" But instead, he takes descriptions of sunflowers from four great poets of the past, including Blake and Ginsberg, and uses them to illuminate the art of description beautifully and in very few words. One final comment: This is a book for poets first and foremost, but as a fiction writer, I found it very helpful.

Christine Grabowski says

I had a difficult time with this book. It was required in one of my writing class. Other participants LOVED this book, but they were into poetry. As a person who doesn't read poetry I had a difficult time getting through it and had a hard time applying it to my YA fiction writing.

Kitty says

Thoroughly enjoyable.

“Every object rightly seen unlocks a new faculty of the soul.” (Emerson)

This book will provide you with a “workshop in your pocket” to help you see and unlock. This book is well worth the romp through the territory called by Coleridge “Best Word, Best Order”.

Description is one of those words that is worth holding up, like an ode, especially if one is a poet. How we describe an object, person, scene, experience is to imbue it with a life beyond what our eyes see. Doty takes us through the layers of perception and discussion of image with words that are not lost in some academic subtext. He provides the reader not only with examples of poems, quotations and ideas ranging from George Herbert to contemporary American poets, but also with a set of keys to engage new understanding.

We know the rule, “show don’t tell” – which caters to the definition of description as the act, or technique of describing, not simply listing facts of what we see. He reminds the reader of Proust’s descriptions, resembling those Japanese flowers gathered tightly into a small sea-shell of a capsule which when dropped into water, slowly and yet surprisingly, expands and blooms. So it is to braid layers of perceptions, including all the senses, and reflect both on what we notice and what is invoked from the past, and if we’re lucky, to find a metaphor, stumble on a point of view, so as to create a totally unique flower. Doty has one chapter devoted to different Sunflower poems, where he analyzes the tone, message; an entire chapter on Elizabeth

Bishop's poem, The Fish and references a dozen complete poems.

David Anthony Sam says

With this collection of thoughts and essays. Mark Doty shows that not only is he a fine poet, he is also a great expicator of poetry and advocate for its craft. He argues effectively for description of the world and the inner experience of it, and the informing of each by the other.

Doty also points to a critical problem with so much current poetry:

"Startling, to go description-hunting and realize that I can thumb through whole books of recent poems with very little evocation of sense perception within them. Why is this the case? I declare myself here on the side of allegiance to the sensible, things as they are, the given, the incompletely knowable, never to get done or get it right or render it whole: ours to say and say. The mightiest of our resources brought to the task, to make the world real."

There is a loss of faith in the ability of language to be more than solipsistic, and a concomitant loss in the craft of making things sensible in both definitions of the word:

"Now everybody in creation mistrusts language, and half the poems we read make a nod toward the unsayable. What's to be done? Language won't do what we wish it would, but we have nothing else—so we have to go forward and behave as if it could do what we wanted (with some faith in the miraculous fact that it does, from time to time, give us a "Song of Myself" or a *Tender Buttons*, something the world wouldn't be the same without).

"Perhaps we can inhabit the interesting middle ground that lies between, on the one side, giving up on referentiality altogether, and, on the other, cleaving to an outdated notion that words can be controlled, can say what we mean to say when we wish to make use of them."

This a book for lovers of beautiful words and the desperate craft of believing that their distillation in unexpected liquors still makes life more alive.

Travis says

A dear friend purchased this book for me, hoping to assist in my dreams of writing a novel. Unfortunately, that dream has never materialized, but it is still a desire. My passion for story has never diminished, and I find myself waltzing within the realm of fiction more and more as I age. This is an important book for anyone who wishes to write or wishes to teach writing well. Engaging throughout.

Sigrun Hodne says

I really wanted to read this book, reading so many positive reviews, but ended up a bit disappointed. I see it mainly as a series of poetry analysis. I guess I hoped for a more comparative & philosophical approach to *The Art of Description: World into Word*.

Jeffrey Moll says

Book: The Art of Description

Author: Mark Doty

Publishing Information: St. Paul: Graywolf Books

Mark Doty, known for his descriptive and artfully provocative poetry, uses the complexity of sensory details to force the reader's mind to center on creativity. The short novel focuses a lot of energy towards describing the world in which we live and how the moments where we are at a loss for words or breathe only means we are content with ourselves. The piece reads like a guidebook for writers and how important it is to acquire description from every possible angle before trying to understand the process of putting it into words. The first half of the book focuses on poetry defining ways in which to use description in prose. This section of the book is very insightful because of how Mark Doty proves how impossible it is to put into words some of the most basic of human interactions or daily routines. It is in this that he is able to connect the reader with the idea that a writer is a creator as much as a very observant fly on the wall.

Although the book reads as a guideline for becoming a strong writer, it deserves a deeper look than it just being a college style textbook. He breaks down his poetry by looking at the root of its meaning followed by the process of attaching descriptions that would fill most if not all of the senses. This fleshing-out process allows the writer to become in tune with their inner vision for their own piece of written work. However, the non-writer will enjoy this book as well because of the central theme focusing on human interactions and how difficult it is to put life into words. He also explores the difficulties that come when faced with the impossible task of connecting the reader with the writer's intent without forcing it upon them too heavily. Mark uses his poetry in this instance to expand on the need for sentence structure to be within the control of the writer, and the writer must understand this in order to command the images they are trying to create.

There are a few moments in the novel where I thought his personal opinion about having boundaries but knowing when to break them confused his over-all theme. Mark's strong use of opinion made it seem as if he forgot his readers which made me almost feel inferior for not being able to keep up. The textbook style in which it reads can be jarring at first because of how direct the voice is, but it follows his motif of human connection and interaction. The final result of the book kept me questioning the act of writing and how important the connection between writer and reader truly is. The last chapter that attaches description with each letter from the alphabet is just another example Mark gives as proof that description is in the eyes of the beholder if and only if they are smart enough to be able to describe it.

Emprise says

Several years ago a poet-friend recounted a humorous anecdote about a creative writing professor he took as an undergraduate. A respected short-story writer, the prof was teaching an introductory course where English majors would write in all four modes—fiction, non-fiction, drama, and poetry—as a means of honing their skills and gauging which was their “true calling,” if such a thing exists. The semester was a boon for all until the final unit on poetry rolled around, when the professor’s sage advice all but evaporated. The only wisdom

she could conjure during lectures was “poetry needs to be as vivid as possible,” and her marginal comments on assignments were of two varieties: “hmm, I can’t see this,” or “yes, I see it!”

It was with this quaint allegory in mind that I read Mark Doty’s *The Art of Description: World into Word*, recently published by Graywolf Press. While I have always admired Doty’s poems—particularly his collections *Sweet Machine* and *My Alexandria*—I must confess that I half-expected to encounter some expressive-but-stale workshop chestnuts peppered with a healthy dollop of Poundian imagism. (“Throw the object on to the visual imagination,” Pound laconically wrote in 1934’s *ABC of Reading*.) While *The Art of Description* is ultimately geared for a beginning or emerging writer, Doty’s jovial and illustrative prose, surprisingly eclectic range of sample poems, and constant acknowledgement that the registering of experience (and thus language) is fraught with subjectivity all make this brief study worthy of any poet’s bookshelf...Read the rest at the site

Ellie says

I can't gush enough about this one. I wanted to underline every word: there wasn't a superfluous phrase in the entire volume. Doty more than convinced me of the power of the word to bring us into closer relationship with the world; while language is never enough, it's all we have and used powerfully by poets it can open the world to us.

The poets Doty uses for examples range from Shelley to Jean Valentine (a personal favorite) and his discussions are always exciting and enlightening.

The book is dense but not impenetrable and, with some effort, I found myself able to understand it. The effort was really minimal considering the payoff.

Zy Marquiez says

The Art Of Description is a very refreshing no frills examination of the many ways description can be employed in writing.

Unorthodox in its approach, subtle, and yet quite insightful, Doty not only brings about compelling analysis of a smattering of writing styles, but also urges the reader to master their individual skill of observation.

On this, Doty cogently writes:

“To some degree, the art of description is the art of perception; what is required, in order to say what you see, is enhanced attention to that looking and the more you look, the more information you get....The resulting visual journey can feel intricate indeed; it makes us see the world before us as composed not of discrete things that don’t touch, but as a continuous realm of interconnected lines.

To be better at description, we have to work at attentiveness.”[1]

Beyond such insight, the author incisively samples the writing of individuals such as Blake, Pound, Swenson, Shelley, Ginsberg, Cummings, et al, thoughtfully ruminating upon particular gems that these

writers have left for individuals to glean upon. Sampling such range in writing allows the reader to see a wider range of styles, each offering a varying, yet exquisite taste, all of which helps solidify the writer's repertoire.

Another point the Doty centers upon is what can be learned from poetry. Echoing the actions of Benjamin Franklin, who once used poetry to expand his vocabulary and writing prowess, the author notes:

"Poetry's project is to use every aspect of language to its maximum effectiveness, finding within it nuances and powers we otherwise could not hear. So the poet needs to be a supreme handler of the figurative speech we all use every day, employing language's tendency to connect like and disparate things to the richest possible effects. In poetry, figuration is at its most sophisticated; condensed, alive with meaning, pointing in multiple directions at once....It's one of the poet's primary tools for conveying the texture of experience, and for inquiring into experience in search for meaning." [2]

Such an examination aids the reader in gaining a deeper understanding of the depth and precision that may be employed when writing poetry. Coming to terms with this, one is also able to thoughtfully approach the art of writing from a more mindful perspective that allows individuals a much wider latitude from which to compose a piece.

At another juncture, Doty shares a sentiment that calls to mind Edgar Allan Poe's wondrous definition of poetry when he said, "Poetry is the rhythmical creation of beauty in words." The author beautifully observes that:

"Every achieved poem inscribes a perceptual signature in the world." [3]

Just as the creative ventures of artists from time immemorial echo into the present, so will the poems of the present echo into the future, continuously leaving dashes of beauty with their very essence.

The Art Of Description is a discerning read in its entirety, that is experienced in its approach, and shrewd in its execution. If you're seeking a new writing path that will not only be novel, but will also teach you how to create your very own path, or perhaps even finetune your old one, then begin right here.

Footnotes:

[1] Mark Doty, *The Art Of Description*, p. 72.

[2] Ibid., p. 76.

[3] Ibid., p. 21.

John Williams says

Having read the entire Graywolf 'The Art of...' series, I found Doty's "...Description" the most inspiring and philosophically helpful. Not only are the poetry selections he pulls from balanced (classical through contemporary, male and female, narrative and experimental), but he provides in-depth analyses that resonate with his broader linguistic concerns. Unlike a few other books in this series, 'Description' lays a larger-level philosophical groundwork by which all poems and analyses can be judged. Doty writes confidently yet with humility. He recognizes the subjectivity of his analyses and sees such subjectivity as a reason to celebrate,

not as a condemning statement about artistic creation.

Lorraine says

If this had been called the art of connotation, it would have been a 5-star review. Great poetry, great examples of how to read critically, not-so great instruction on "the art of description".

Michael says

This slim volume contains the words of great poets (Elizabeth Bishop, e.e. cummings, May Swenson and more), as well as beautifully crafted sentences. The chapter "Description's Alphabet" is genius. Two favorite quotes: "Description is an ART to the degree that it gives us not just the world but the inner life of the witness." "ECONOMY is a virtue, albeit an overrated one ... EXCESS, which is seldom understood to be a virtue, can certainly be a pleasure."

Ann Michael says

I loved this book, but then, I am a fan of most of Doty's work--so that's no surprise.

For writers, particularly for poets, these brief and cogent essays offer opportunities for learning about how description works in the poem, and how a deft choice of language can alter tone, mood, meaning.

Lovely examination of Bishop's seminal "The Fish."

Worth studying if you want to write write about poetry, or to understand how poems operate.

Megan Wenng says

totally meant for poets, but I'll be damned if I didn't pull something out of it as a strict fiction writer.
