



Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying with the Masters

Robert Pinsky

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Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying with the Masters Robert Pinsky Quick, joyful, and playfully astringent, with surprising comparisons and examples, this collection takes an unconventional approach to the art of poetry. Instead of rules, theories, or recipes, *Singing School* emphasizes ways to learn from great work: studying magnificent, monumentally enduring poems and how they are made—in terms borrowed from the “singing school” of William Butler Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium.”

Robert Pinsky’s headnotes for each of the 80 poems and his brief introductions to each section take a writer’s view of specific works: William Carlos Williams’s “Fine Work with Pitch and Copper” for intense verbal music; Emily Dickinson’s “Because I Could Not Stop for Death” for wild imagination in matter-of-fact language; Robert Southwell’s “The Burning Babe” for surrealist aplomb; Wallace Stevens’s “The House Was Quiet and the World Was Calm” for subtlety in meter. Included are poems by Aphra Behn, Allen Ginsberg, George Herbert, John Keats, Mina Loy, Thomas Nashe, and many other master poets.

This anthology respects poetry’s mysteries in two senses of the word: techniques of craft and strokes of the inexplicable.

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Gabrielle says

This is a good resource for students of poetry writing, or just wanting to know more about poetry, similar to a workshop, minus the writing part

This is a good book, I am not familiar with most of the poets featured in the book. What I like about this book is Mr. Pinsky encouraged readers to practice reading poems they really like and writing it down by copying or memorizing, putting it into practice in knowing the poem by "heart". Also the book is divided by parts that talks about free form, listening to the poems like a song and how the words flow through, variety of forms that used traditional and yet has its own unique voice, and dreaming things up, which has that surreal feel of the poem.

If you are looking for a book that teaches you the basics of poetry, this is not for you, this is just a handy guideline or short workshop that talks about different aspects of Poetry, based on different examples of poems written by the masters of the field. Mr Pinsky's explanation in each parts is simple with a dash of Philosophical, and starts each poems with a question a tidbit of explanation about the poem. W.W. Norton is for me one of the best publication of academic books that doesn't look like textbooks.

Lee says

Pretty simple anthology. Not sure if worth the money, but I enjoyed the brief introductions at the beginning of each section.

Kerfe says

Pinsky teaches poetry at Boston University, and this book is most likely based on his approach to his classes. The basic premise is simple: to learn about writing poetry, read poetry. Lots of it, and lots of different poets, writing in different styles, from different centuries.

His "prompts" are really just guides to looking at what each poet brings to their words and form and learning from that.

And he urges the reader to speak the words aloud. Like notes on a page, the sounds need to be heard to truly come to life, using in this case the instrument of the human voice.

Nearly all the poetic examples are written in English; these are not translations for the most part. I know that when I read poetry originating in another language, the translators always note the difficulty of their task. I would be interested to know if Pinsky feels that a poet writing in English should learn mostly from other poets writing in English. Although obviously poetic translation will always remain inexact (just look through the different versions of Basho's haiku for one), I don't think you should exclude the poets of other languages

from the learning process.

Pinsky is not telling you "how" to write. By grouping diverse examples into different approaches to verse, he provides a good start to a foundation in the many ways poets show us the world. Might as well begin by learning from, and imitating, the best.

Samantha says

I've found some of Pinsky's past work helpful in my poetry studies, but this book seemed thrown together for the sake of putting out another book. I don't mind that he selected somewhat less popular poems by certain poets, but many of them don't seem like the best teachable examples (and many of them didn't grab me, stylistically, as much as I expected them to). Additionally, there is barely more than a few sentences of analysis from Pinsky on each poem...sometimes even less. And, while I don't particularly support a hand-holding method when it comes to "teaching" poetry, this could have been a great volume to use in poetry courses if there was more analysis that prompted group discussion.

Overall, this is just a seemingly random anthology of poems not worthy enough, as a whole, to justify a whole book. Even the separate sections are nonsensical, as Pinsky frequently references poems from previous sections in other ones. You also get the feeling he's trying to fill space, as some poems are referenced more than once. Bottom line, if you're looking for Pinsky, go for *The Sounds of Poetry*, instead.

Ann says

Really enjoyed this one. Pinsky's poetry selections are inspired. Maybe too sophisticated for a novice. For beginning students of poetry, I'd recommend Mary Oliver's *Poetry Handbook* or Ted Hughes' *Poetry in the Making*.

Dave says

This is mostly an anthology, that overlaps with Pinsky's other anthology - *Essential Pleasures*. Most of these poems are classics that you've either read or heard of.

Pinsky adds a few comments and some writing prompts before each one. You could read a lot worse, but I don't think he put much into this. I think he's more talent and passionate than this.

T.J. says

Disappointing.

If this book were simply an anthology of Pinsky's favorite poems, it would be merely adequate. There are the

traditional heavy hitters like Keats and Dickinson (and you can probably guess which obvious poems are included), Frost and Shakespeare, Whitman and Langston Hughes. "Jabberwocky" shows up too. That's not to say there aren't a few pleasant surprises here; there's the delightful "Big Mystical Circus" by Jorge de Lima, a saucy 17th century poem about erectile dysfunction, and a poem by Christopher Smart that I thought must have been a lost Beat classic until I realized he wrote in the 18th century. I suppose Pinsky could have dated the poems.

But the problem is that this book isn't billed as just a collection, but rather as a study of the masters. The blurbs on the cover commend Pinsky as a "teacher" and celebrate his "pedagogical legacy." With the notable exception of the few pages of that mark each section ("Freedom," "Listening," etc.) there is little instruction, analysis, exegesis, or even help with the poems. Instead of introducing each poem or highlighting elements worth noting, he provides fragmentary "head notes" that offer little insight. For example, his introduction to a Dickinson poem is the four word dictum: "Get it by heart." Nice sentiment, but not particularly illuminating.

I pity the student writer who gets writing directions like this: "Try your own, contemporary version of this, in your own world, keeping it fresh yet recognizable--good luck."

That's essentially the gist of Pinsky's teaching. Read master poets. Try it yourself. As for any more direction or tips, well, good luck.

Karlan says

Our former Poet Laureate does a wonderful job of introducing different styles and ideas. The introduction to each of the four sections is easily read and inspiring.

Andrea Lakly says

This is a great compilation of poetry. Pinsky calls it a "literary" study of poetry, but without any of the pejorative connotations of that term, and I would agree. Writing suggestions accompany each poem. I haven't actually written anything, but I've dreamed that I might.

Jsavett1 says

I'm sorry. It's possible I just don't "get" Robert Pinsky, but I doubt it. I know his poetry and anthologies are almost universally beloved, but I can't find much to love in either. I'll limit my comments in this review to ones regarding only Singing School.

While the introduction was promising and had me reaching for my highlighter and pen to add excited marginalia, once the book proper began, I was wholly disappointed. For two reasons.

First, Pinsky's analyses of the poems are limited to a pithy sentence or two which serve to highlight some formal element and pose a writing challenge for the reader. Granted, he discusses some of the poems in each chapter introduction, but these go no more than detail and surface deep.

Second, while Pinsky suggests early in the book that he'll be focusing on older works as examples because doing so inhibits imitation and forces aspiring writers to discover essence. Fine. But the poems he selects just don't move me. Yes, they may embody a particular point Pinsky is making but I find it hard to believe those were the "best" he could find. Excerpting INCREDIBLY long passages from these poems also gives the impression of his trying to turn a much slimmer volume into a longer work.

I was inspired to create my own anthology of poems which make me see anew. Maybe that's a good lesson from Singing School.

Kevin says

I think if one reads this book, plus *The Sounds of Poetry*, plus his selected poems, one gets an advanced degree in the sonics and application of poetry.

Skylar Burris says

I had been hoping for more advice on reading and writing poetry from this book, or more insight into poetry in general, but the introductions to each chapter, while occasionally thought provoking, were generally vague. There was no analysis of the individual poems, but only a short blurb atop each, sometimes with no more than a sentence along the lines of, "Try writing a poem like this." In other words, the book did not make me a better reader or writer of poetry. It entered my library alongside all the poetry books as yet another anthology of poetry, and not one of the best. The poetry selections are wide ranging, covering classics to modern verse and hitting on many of the most renowned poets in the western cannon. I came across a few poems I had not read, but with most I was familiar. It would have been useful to have a date next to the title of each poem, however. In the back of the book you will find paragraph-long biographies of each poet. I underlined seldom, but a few comments that struck me included:

"The more I read, the less literary my writing became."

"The past can offer a useful way of rebelling against the orthodoxies of the present."

"Strictly speaking, you don't write a poem, you compose it."

Claire says

I cannot wait to get this one. What a profound contribution RP has made to the next generation of readers and authors with this work. So awesome!

Scott says

Meh. It was really just an anthology with a few comments.

Ruth says

Pinsky himself admits that this book is his personal collection of poems that exhibit one or more masterful elements of poetry as a craft. I loved his introductory statements to each poem; some invited the reader/poet to try his or her hand at a similar poetic style or varied subject. Some mention the need to look more closely at one stanza or particular wording.

As a reader, I came away impressed not always with the poems included in the collection (as is the case with most anthologies, I loved some and dismissed others that didn't really speak to me)--but also impressed with the desire to create a personal anthology of poems that speak to me. That, at least in part, is a goal of this book. Pinsky wishes the reader to make his or her own poetic anthology and include the "know by heart" choices as well as the "always read aloud" or "hold deeply in your heart" choices.

I am so glad I heard the author speak in person and recite several of the poems in this volume. And I'm happy to add another poetic volume to my shelves.
