



# How to Read a Poem: And Fall in Love with Poetry

*By Edward Hirsch*

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How to Read a Poem is an unprecedented exploration of poetry and feeling. In language at once acute and emotional, distinguished poet and critic Edward Hirsch describes why poetry matters and how we can open up our imaginations so that its message can make a difference. In a marvelous reading of verse from around the world, including work by Pablo Neruda, Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens, and Sylvia Plath, among many others, Hirsch discovers the true meaning of their words and ideas and brings their sublime message home into our hearts. A masterful work by a master poet, this brilliant summation of poetry and human nature will speak to all readers who long to place poetry in their lives.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Edward Hirsch's primer may very well inspire readers to catch the next flight for Houston and sign up for any and all of his courses. Not for nothing does this attentive and adoring poet-teacher title his book *How to Read a Poem and Fall in Love with Poetry*; Hirsch's big guide to getting the most out of this form is packed with inspiring examples and thousands of epigrams and allusions. Above all, he is intent on poetry's physical and emotional power. In chapters devoted to the lyric, the narrative, the poetry of sorrow, of ecstasy, of witness, Hirsch continually conveys the sheer ecstasy of this vital act of communication. (He takes us, for instance, with great care and mounting excitement, through Emily Brontë's "Spellbound," which he discovered at age 8 when "baseball season was over for the year.") Above all, there is the thrill of discovery as Hirsch offers up works by artists ranging from Anna Akhmatova to Walt Whitman, Elizabeth Bishop to Adam Zagajewski, and everyone in between. I defy you not to fall in love with Wislawa Szymborska on the basis of "The Joy of Writing," which begins:

Why does this written doe bound through these written woods?  
For a drink of written water from a spring  
whose surface will xerox her soft muzzle?  
Why does she lift her head; does she hear something?  
Perched on four slim legs borrowed from the truth,  
she pricks up her ears beneath my fingertips.

Elsewhere, Hirsch's section on Sterling Brown's redefinitions of African American work songs should put this neglected poet back on the map. And his introductions to Eastern European poets such as Jirí Orten, Attila József, and Miklós Radnóti will make you want to ferret out their hard-to-find work. (Perhaps his publisher should put out a companion anthology...)

Hirsch manages to cram entire worlds and lives into 258 pages of text (which he follows up with a huge glossary and extended reading list). His two paragraphs on Juan Gelman, whose son was murdered and pregnant daughter-in-law disappeared during Argentina's "Dirty War," bring this man's art into clear, tragic focus. But even here, the compulsively generous author is compelled to enshrine the words of other critics, foregrounding Eduardo Galeano and Julio Cortázar, who describes Gelman's art as "a permanent caress of words on unknown tombs." What a pleasure it is to be inside Hirsch's head! He seems to have read everything and absorbed most of it, and he wears his considerable scholarship lightly. Many of his fellow poets have suffered for their art, have been imprisoned and killed--but above all, Hirsch makes us realize that, no matter what the artist's circumstances, subject, or theme, "the stakes are always high" in this game that writer and reader alike must keep playing. --Kerry Fried

#### From Library Journal

Although it was only a decade ago that doomsayers foresaw the death of poetry as a viable literary genre, there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest. Poetry slams at bookstores and nightclubs, "Poets in the Schools" programs, and the unprecedented appearance of poets on mainstream television all point to the renewed popularity of the genre. Here are two new guides designed to enrich the experience of poetry. Hirsch (*On Love*, LJ 6/15/98) has gathered an eclectic group of poems from many times and places, with selections as varied as postwar Polish poetry, works by Keats and Christopher Smart, and lyrics from African American work songs. A prolific, award-winning poet in his own right, Hirsch suggests helpful strategies for

understanding and appreciating each poem. The book is scholarly but very readable and incorporates interesting anecdotes from the lives of the poets. Part poetry explication and part memoir, Peacock's charming book includes 18 favorite poems that she has collected and cherished over the years. Offering sensitive interpretations of each work, Peacock tends to favor modern and contemporary poets such as May Swenson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Yusef Komunyakaa. Like Hirsch, Peacock is a popular and critically acclaimed poet; she is also a founder of the "Poetry in Motion" program that puts poetry in America's buses and subways. Peacock encourages the shared enjoyment of poetry through reading groups and provides practical advice for organizing a poetry circle. Most public libraries will want to acquire the Peacock book, while Hirsch is a good choice for academic and larger public libraries. Ellen Sullivan, Ferguson Lib., Stamford, CT  
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## Review

"A lovely book, full of joy and wisdom."-The Baltimore Sun

"Hirsch's contribution is significant, [grounded] in the obvious pleasure he has experienced through words. . . . Who could resist the wiles of this poetry-broker-a writer rapidly becoming the baby boomers' preeminent man of letters?"-Detroit Free Press

"Laudable . . . The answer Hirsch gives to the question of how to read a poem is: Ecstatically."-The Boston Book Review

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