

How to Enjoy Poetry

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Introduction

Yes, I enjoy poetry. Not *all* poetry, obviously. I make that point because you may have encountered poetry in your life that has left you completely cold, and thereby decided that the whole genre was not for you. That was foolish. That is like resolving to avoid all chorus girls because one was beastly to you at the Bradford Alhambra in 1992. Look, you've got your similes, I've got mine.

When I was doing an English degree at Birmingham Polytechnic in the eighties, a family member said to me, in a someone-needs-to-tell-you-this tone, 'You know, the family think you're a weirdo, reading poetry and wearing a [*pause*] Shakespeare badge.' Maybe, looking back, the badge *was* a bit embarrassing, but the 'reading poetry' remark stuck with me. I guess it was the kind of conversation that happens when someone from a working-class background starts getting fancy ideas. The poet John Betjeman said education enables one to feel at home anywhere, except at home. If my passion had been, say, mathematics, a more worldly discipline, I think I'd have been OK. I may have even got away with a Fibonacci badge, but it was the effete nature of poetry that made me, suddenly, the exotic bird amidst the sparrows.

Poetry lovers are viewed with suspicion. Many years later, when a popular tabloid was trying to convince its readers that they had identified a sexually motivated murderer, their character-assassination Exhibit A was 'He owns over a thousand books, many of them poetry'. So, if you are into poetry or, better still, if this book gets you into poetry, best keep quiet about it. Being a poetry lover is like being a Christian. It might be a defining aspect of your entire being, but still be careful who you tell. I