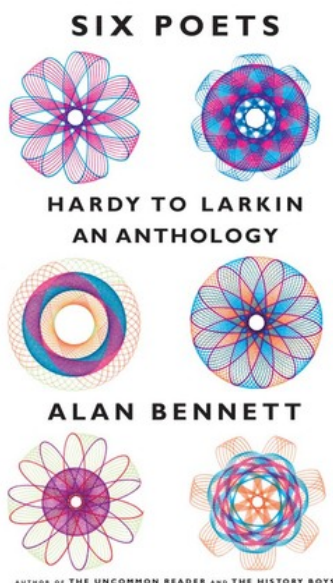




Six Poets: Hardy to Larkin: An Anthology

Alan Bennett

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Six Poets: Hardy to Larkin: An Anthology Alan Bennett

The inimitable Alan Bennett selects and comments upon six favorite poets and the pleasures of their works

In this candid, thoroughly engaging book, Alan Bennett creates a unique anthology of works by six well-loved poets. Freely admitting his own youthful bafflement with poetry, Bennett reassures us that the poets and poems in this volume are not only accessible but also highly enjoyable. He then proceeds to prove irresistibly that this is so.

Bennett selects more than seventy poems by Thomas Hardy, A. E. Housman, John Betjeman, W. H. Auden, Louis MacNeice, and Philip Larkin. He peppers his discussion of these writers and their verse with anecdotes, shrewd appraisal, and telling biographical detail: Hardy lyrically recalls his first wife, Emma, in his poetry, although he treated her shabbily in real life. The fabled Auden was a formidable and off-putting figure at the lectern. Larkin, hoping to subvert snooping biographers, ordered personal papers shredded upon his death.

Simultaneously profound and entertaining, Bennett's book is a paean to poetry and its creators, made all the more enjoyable for being told in his own particular voice. its creators, made all the more enjoyable for being told in his own particular voice.

Six Poets: Hardy to Larkin: An Anthology Details

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From Reader Review Six Poets: Hardy to Larkin: An Anthology for online ebook

Victoria says

Great read. Worth it for Hardy's cat's name alone.

Paul Taylor says

Excellent selection of poems enhanced by the commentary on each of the poets by Bennett. A useful introduction to the poets of the 1930's

Joseph says

Six Poets: Hardy to Larkin: An Anthology by Alan Bennett is a collection of over seventy poems with commentary from six different poets. Bennett is an English author and Tony Award-winning playwright. Bennett's first stage play, "Forty Years On", was produced in 1968.

I jumped at this book. As a latecomer to poetry and having little in the way of formal education on the subject, I readily recognized the poets Hardy and Larkin. However, I found that the four between them were new to me: Houseman, Betjeman, Auden, and MacNeice. Like Bennett, I was baffled by poetry in my younger years and never took more than the required literature classes for a bachelor's in science degree. I do remember having my review of Eliot's "The Wasteland" torn apart because I concentrated on the historical realities rather than the fertility symbolism. I was a history major. That turned me off to poetry until a few years ago. Earlier, I recalled my fourth-grade public school teacher reading to the class Larkin's poem "Church Going" which seemed to directly clash with my Catholic Sunday school teachings. I look back at my fourth-grade teacher and the books she brought to class for us to read and I see her as a subversive hero that kept me interested in reading.

Bennet gives a bit of a biography of each poet in their separate sections and comments on the poems and the poet's lives. Hardy had a thing about graveyards. Bennet tells of how Hardy took his soon to be second wife to visit the grave of his first wife. He pointed to the empty plot next to his first wife and told his wife to be, "This will be yours." She accepted his proposal and they were married in what is probably the creepiest marriage proposal outside of fiction.

The information included with the poems opens the readers to common themes in the poetry as well as the poet's influences. Larkin, the librarian, is quite blunt and even vulgar at times. Auden was better with engineering than love and it shows in his poems. There was a difference to these men and it reflected in their writing. There is no mold that poets are formed from.

Bennett is unintrusive in his discussion and notes on the poems and poets. He does relate themes and explains the influence of the style of writing without a lecturer's despotic intolerance to interpretation. It is more at a casual conversational tone with a touch of humor and personal discovery. It is like talking with an enlightened friend rather than a lesson.

Six Poets is the sort of book that will draw in those who have been intimidated by poetry and those wanting to enjoy the words without the theory. One can love aviation without being an aeronautical engineer. One can appreciate military history without being a soldier. And one can also appreciate poetry without a degree. *Six Poets* is a welcome addition for anyone curious about poetry yet intimidated by the reputation. Very well done.

Hugo Wood says

Great re-introductory into poetry. Bennett guides you through some of Britain's most beloved poets of the past 100 years and their work. He makes you feel ok about not having a clue what most of them are talking about!

Pop Bop says

"... [W]hat seems casual and even discursive is actually carefully constructed."

While this book is ostensibly about Hardy, Housman, Betjeman, Auden, MacNeice, and Larkin, it is really about, and cannot help but be about, Alan Bennett. And I'm quite fine with that. The poems in the "anthology" can be found elsewhere, and each poet's set of collected works is readily available. By the same token there is a wide ranging choice of academic and popular scholarship that addresses each poet's works. We don't really need this book in order to approach any of these poets. But, if you wish to know what Bennett thinks of these poets, if you are curious about how he reacts to their work, or if you would just like a bit of demystification or insightful appreciation, well then you'll have to read this book.

Alan Bennett carries the burden of public intellectual and arts commentator lightly and without affectation. In the secret recesses of his heart he may think he's quite hot stuff, but not a hint or whiff of self-importance mars his writing or his public comments. Rather, he projects as a thoughtful, intelligent, generous and rather forgiving, not to mention modest, observer of the literary scene. That is evident on every page of this book. Sure, his comments and observations regarding the poems are insightful, entertaining and thoughtful. He states his opinions with clarity and authority. But, his sly and deadpan throwaway observations about each poet are where the real pleasures lie.

In a few short lines, or with a telling anecdote, or while quoting some other observer, or with a snippet of an interview excerpt, Bennett manages to capture something of the essential nature of each of these poets - both as men of letters and as simple human beings. There are many observations regarding the poets as private men and public men, and many trenchant judgments regarding those poets' public selves versus their private selves. If you just were to go through the book and highlight each bit that addresses how the poets saw themselves, projected themselves, hid or disguised themselves, or revealed themselves in their work or public comments, I suspect you would be surprised to find that you'd highlighted most of the book.

So, I do like and admire these poets. But I really appreciate Alan Bennett. And, as a consequence of the happy conjunction of these two forces, I particularly enjoyed this book.

(Please note that I received a free copy of this book without a review requirement, or any influence regarding review content should I choose to post a review. Apart from that I have no connection at all to either the author or the publisher of this book.)

Sue says

Six Poets is an anthology, an introduction and also an excellent education in the poetry of Hardy and Larkin, but also Houseman, Betjeman, Auden, and MacNeice. For those with interest but not extensive knowledge, this is a very good way to settle in to reading poetry by these classic poets, learning of essential themes, important biographical information, even links between some of the poets. Bennett is an amiable guide, never pedantic, providing information but doing it in an interesting way and then letting the poetry speak for itself. It's quite easy to discover who to follow further.

There are both full poems and lengthy excerpts of longer pieces of signature works, preceded or followed by Bennett's description of themes, metaphors, relationships to events in the poets' lives or world events.

This is an excellent introduction to these poets as it provides a biographical, literary and historical context for each...and actually connects them within the British literary tradition. I do recommend it to anyone with an interest in poetry who would like to learn more about these well known figures in a very "friendly" way.

A copy of this book was provided by the publisher through NetGalley in return for an honest review.

Derek Emerson says

Outstanding book serving as a great introduction to six poets. I was not familiar with two of them, and the ones I knew I now know better thanks to Bennett's insightful and interesting comments. He has a conversational style so it feels like you are sitting in a study with a bright person who avoids being condescending.

Cooper Renner says

Hardy, Housman and Larkin are poets I've read pretty much all of--all, that is, in the sense of what they wanted read, not travesties like those enormous "complete" collections of Larkin. Macneice, Auden, Betjeman, not so much. So I thought it would be fun to have Bennett's guided tour. And it is a satisfying book, though it doesn't make me any more eager to read the three I've mostly only sampled.

Sid Nuncius says

A joy

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, and will continue to enjoy it for many years, I think. I remember the original Channel 4 series in 1990 with great affection, and I am delighted that this book (effectively a transcript) is available again.

This is classic Bennett – witty, extremely knowledgeable and insightful and always direct, clear and

readable. This is billed as an "anthology" , but is really Bennet's reflections on and analysis of the work and a little of the life of these six poets, illustrated with selections from their verse. It's a wonderfully illuminating and enjoyable read.

To give an idea of Bennett's style here, he begins his essay on Auden with "Much of Auden, even most of Auden...I do not understand." I know I'm in good hands when I read things like that – and he goes on to quote Isherwood's explanation of the obscurity of some of Auden's writing: that Auden used to save up favourite lines and then group them together "entirely regardless of grammar or sense." But as well as this quite genuine expression of intellectual humility, in the same essay he quotes Kierkegaard, this time to illustrate two aspect of Auden's life: "There are two ways: one is to suffer; the other is to become a professor of the fact that another suffers." He also reports that Auden and his partner lived in some squalor and after a rather stomach-churning anecdote remarks, "One wonders where did one wash one's hands after washing one's hands."

This mixture of clarity, honesty, insight, intellectual brilliance and real wit pervades the entire book and makes it a huge pleasure. He also selects the poems very well, from the very well-known like Housman's "Into my heart an air that kills" to the (to me) obscure, surprising and wonderful discoveries like Hardy's At The Draper's. He uses them to illustrate his points very well and to give a very good picture of the breadth and development of each poet's work.

Bennett celebrates both the direct and the obscure and writes illuminatingly on both. His love of poetry as a form and of its capabilities shines through, summed up in this remark on Betjeman and Larkin:

"Both...wrote straightforward poetry that didn't need much exposition. But it's also the case that poetry, though we don't learn it by heart nowadays, and though there is no poetic equivalent of the Booker Prize, it still has magic and seems magical." Well, quite – and if you have any interest at all in poetry or if you just like to read great critical writing, don't hesitate. This is a joy from start to finish and very warmly recommended.

(I received an ARC via Netgalley.)

Rebecca says

Such a wonderful short anthology with illuminating and thoughtful commentary from the peerless Alan Bennett. Enjoyed his balance of biographical detail and critical analysis for each poet that is accessible and interesting for scholars and casual readers alike.

Only criticism is that he missed out MacNeice's "Snow" and Larkin's "The Whitsun Weddings"! Other than that, a fine selection for all six poets - I really enjoyed revisiting poems studied at university, and encountering new poems too. This was just perfect for my daily commute; what a treasure.

Pamela says

Loved, loved, loved this book. The poems and poets themselves are classics and can be found in many other anthologies plus within their own gathered collections. What makes this such a standout is Alan Bennett. His insights into each man and his poetry added so much to my own appreciation. What makes this really special though is that he comes at this just as you or I would. An average person who wants to read poetry but doesn't have any expert knowledge about the mechanics and formal structure of a poem. He is an advocate of

just reading an accessible poem just for the sheer joy of it. Wonderful book!

Steve says

Poems from Hardy, Housman, Auden, McNeice, Larkin, Betjeman and Auden read by Alan Bennet, with short introductions.

Hardy, Housman and Larkin were dark and cynical, whilst brilliant poets. Betjeman, Auden and to some extent, McNeice provide a counter-balance.

Gavin says

Hardy, Housman, Auden, Betjeman, Larkin, MacNeice: all men who tended to emphasise the tragic. (You think Betjeman didn't, but you might be confusing his writing, full of loss and pettiness, with his foppy, daffy TV persona.)

Wonderful, this - parallel poems and commentaries - covering the famous gobbets dutifully, but also picking excerpts which rarely come to light. The commentary is more clipped and sardonic than you might expect from Bennett, if you know him only by reputation / caricature.

The cover shown above is much more beautiful than the cover I had.

Laura says

Full of delicious literary nuggets and surprises. I didn't think I liked Hardy but it turns out I do, sort of. Houseman was a bit of an odd one, and Betjeman's a little populist, but I found poetry I really liked by both - would like to try a version of Betjeman's NW5 and N6 as a writing exercise. As always, Bennett hits the nail on the head time and time again - Hardy's 'At Church' presents the vanity of the clergyman and the disillusionment of the young woman without any moral, just the poet "putting a frame around it"; Betjeman was "so English it was almost a joke"; MacNeice was "riven by doubt and duality" and wasn't "single-minded enough" to make a fool out of himself as other poets did (over boys, over Communism etc) and perhaps his poetry suffered a little as a result. I'd never read 'The Slow Starter' before and it's sublime - a testament to lost opportunities, the wish to be a little bolder, a little bit more forceful. But the best is saved till last: Larkin. Bennett has a word about narrative voice, which I liked for its pith ("The 'I' [in Larkin] is always the eye. It is not always I.") and will definitely use in class, I think, for easy explanation, but also appeals because Bennett's saying Larkin isn't necessarily who he's pretending to be in his verse (hence the bonfire of diaries after his death, eh?) Nevertheless, he's not a nice man (great anecdote about him saying to a Hull student caught at a bus stop in the rain with him "Don't think you're coming under my umbrella" and this being a metaphor for his art - resolutely refusing to console). Finally, Bennett's choice of Toads Revisited, Aubade and The Trees as the final poems to end the anthology is just PERFECT. Loved, loved, loved.

Scott Langston says

I was moved and intrigued, both by the poems themselves and by Bennett's commentary. I find myself genuinely interested in poetry for the first time in my life and it's as though a whole new world has opened up. I've tried before, so maybe I'm just a late developer and this arrived at the right time.
