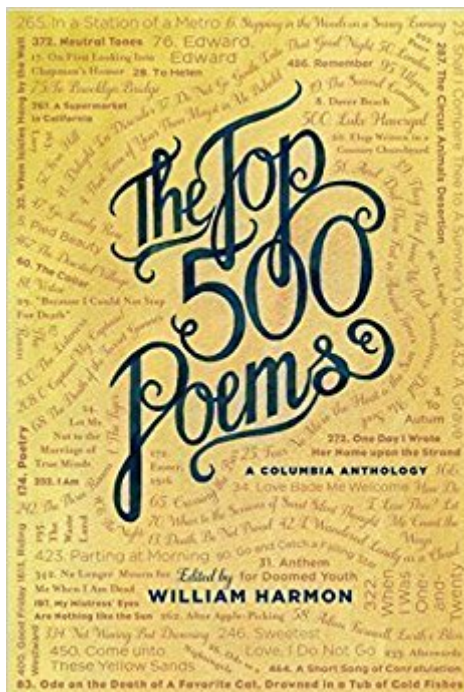


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The Top 500 Poems



Synopsis

The Top 500 Poems offers a vivid portrait of poetry in English, assembling a host of popular and enduring poems as chosen by critics, editors, poets, and general readers. These works speak across centuries, beginning with Chaucer's resourceful inventions and moving through Shakespeare's masterpieces, John Donne's complex originality, and Alexander Pope's mordant satires. The anthology also features perennial favorites such as William Blake, William Wordsworth, and John Keats; Emily Dickinson's prisms of profundity; the ironies of Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot; and the passion of Sylvia Plath and Allen Ginsberg. These 500 poems are verses that readers either know already or will want to know, encapsulating the visceral power of truly great literature. William Harmon provides illuminating commentary to each work and a rich introduction that ties the entire collection together.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I like to buy this book as a present for people I like because I know I can hardly go wrong. (Forget the Godiva chocolates or the Heitz Cellars Cabernet Sauvignon: this will last!) Whether one is a wannabe rap master from Watts or a distinguished professor of English lit at the Sorbonne, there will be something here to please, I promise. It should be emphasized that this is a collection of strictly English language poetry, which means, for example, that none of verses from Edward Fitzgerald's very English translation of The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam appears even though some

of those verses are among the most popular and the most anthologized. It should also be noted that this is not a contemporary collection (copyright date, 1992) so there's no Gary Soto or Rita Dove or Louise Glück or even Margaret Atwood. It should also be pointed out that if you're looking into Keats's, e.g., "Ode to a Nightingale," for the first time, perhaps this is not the best place to find it since none of the poems are explicated. Editor William Harmon does give a brief note as an introduction to each poet, and concludes each poem with a brief comment. The collection is popular of course and spans English poetry from Chaucer to Sylvia Plath but there's nary a ditty to be found. Although T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" is here (hurrah!), there's nothing from his Book of Practical Cats (alas) and no Kipling's "If"! This is really high class stuff, quite simply the best. All the giants are here, Shakespeare, Donne, Pope, Burns, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, Ezra Pound, Andrew Marvell, Frost, Yeats, Dickinson, etc., etc. Some moderns are represented, Allen Ginsberg, Gwendolyn Brooks, Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur, Philip Larkin, etc.

To begin, it's important to realize that "The Top 500 Poems" was compiled according to popularity in reproduction, not necessarily in terms of quality. It's also faced with the daunting task of representing English poetry from about 1300 or so until the 1900s. Therefore, it unavoidably has a couple of poems included that seem out of place. For instance, I didn't really need to have "The Purple Cow" or "Paul Revere's Ride" compiled for me, and I wouldn't have included a translated version of the General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales. I sincerely doubt if any reader of the book has found all the poems included to his or her liking. However, the overwhelming quality of the bulk of the book more than makes up for the weak patches. "The Top 500 Poems" is well organized chronologically, giving the reader a definite sense of progression through history. The introductory paragraphs to each author are informative and concise, and the commentary after each poem is brief but illuminating. Most important, of course, are the poems themselves, which at their best glow with the energy of the greatest literature. Personal favorites included here are: "Western Wind," "They Flee From Me," "That Time of Year Thou Mayst in Me Behold," "The Sun Rising," "To Penshurst," "The Collar," "To His Coy Mistress," "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard," "Holy Thursday," "Composed Upon Westminster Bridge," "Kubla Khan," "Ozymandias," "Ode On a Grecian Urn," "Ulysses," "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed," "Because I Could Not Stop for Death," "God's Grandeur," "Sailing to Byzantium," "The Red Wheelbarrow," "Dulce et Decorum Est," "Fern Hill," "Church Going," and "Daddy," to name a few. Many, many more poems equally wonderful are included along with these.

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