

Some books worth reading



Alan Bennett: Six Poets from Hardy to Larkin

Larkin

Bennett isn't a poet which makes him a more neutral commentator than other poets. He is an astute commentator and, because he has chosen these poets, a benign one. He chooses ten poems which makes a nice easy introduction to Larkin, whether you like him or not. He's not easy to like as a person and his poetry is an acquired taste that I haven't quite managed yet. Bennett is always well worth reading and his short commentaries (rarely more than a page) will, I think, help the student of Larkin more than lengthier analyses by experts.

He makes an important point about Larkin, which could be said of any poet, that the 'I' in a poem is not necessarily the 'I' of the poet. When reading a novel we do not assume that the use of the first person refers to the author; we should beware of doing the same when reading a poem. 'A poet can counterfeit' writes Bennett, which while on the right lines makes a poet seem a deceiver, not the same thing.

One of the most noticeable traits about Larkin, as Bennett remarks, is that he shows that a poet can write about the ordinary. 'Nothing, like something, happens anywhere.' Poetry is not all about the Charge of the Light Brigade, after all. Once you come to browse some poems, there are more about the everyday than you might have thought about.

Bennett's other choices are Hardy, Housman, Betjeman, Auden and MacNeice, all of which are worth dipping into.

Clive James: The Fire of Joy

Eighty Poems - including Larkin's 'An Arundel Tomb'

James is a great admirer of Larkin to the extent that he says 'in my opinion he was the greatest English poet since Marvell', which seems to be saying something. Unsurprisingly, 'An Arundel Tomb' is therefore one of his favourites and his opinion well worth reading.

If you want to have a go at disputing his rating of Larkin, which I certainly would enjoy, it would make a good discussion topic for a Friday afternoon. Whatever your opinions, James makes a great conversationalist – though you'd have to imagine his half of the dialogue, sadly.

Each poem comes with a brief commentary which makes an ideal starting point either for poems or pots you don't know, or a new angle on poems you've already encountered such as 'My Last Duchess', 'Ozymandias', 'Kubla Khan' and so on through to Carol Ann Duffy's 'Mrs Midas'. James is always insightful and never boring. He's a poet worth reading himself.

Michael Rosen - What is Poetry

What is Poetry (a big topic!) is aimed at a young audience but there are a few insights that might be of interest to older students if you come across a copy. I liked 'Poetry can make familiar things unfamiliar and familiar things unfamiliar'. That's worth mulling over.

Finally, if you get a chance to watch '**What makes a poem ... a poem?**' by **Melissa Kovac** on YouTube, it's five minutes well spent. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JwhouCNq-Fc>