

John Berryman and Robert Giroux: A Publishing Friendship

Patrick Samway

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Patrick Samway's literary history portrays editor Robert Giroux's relationship with confessional poet and writer John Berryman.

Giroux, who published most of Berryman's books in the US, studied with the poet at Columbia. They remained in contact until Berryman killed himself in 1972. Featuring excerpts of their correspondence, Samway's text shows Berryman's trust in Giroux as his editor. Their writings, from letters to Berryman's work, illuminate their supportive relationship, especially the life of the haunted, boundary-pushing, and award-winning poet.

Excerpts from Berryman's letters are charming and raw, while Giroux's sensitive responses include increasing reassurances and encouragement; some quell his literary squabbles. Giroux's military service in WWII, and move from Harcourt & Brace to Farrar & Strauss, is also covered in this book about making books; Giroux is rendered the stable-seeming foil to Berryman's tormented genius.

Many other writers appear as their careers and reputations rise, including T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, whose mentor, Shakespeare scholar Mark Van Doren (who stood in for conscripted Giroux as best man at Berryman's first wedding), was a strong early influence for both. Poets and peers like Delmore Schwartz and Robert Lowell figure into the men's correspondence, too, as do many top writers whom Giroux published. Both men express empathy for fellow artists, even in the midst of Berryman's struggles with work, worry, and whiskey: he structured his writing time around teaching, supporting his family while pursuing creative projects in spurts.

John Berryman and Robert Giroux is a compelling account of a great publishing relationship that influenced twentieth-century American poetry.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (November / December 2020)

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