



The Pigheaded Soul: Essays and Reviews on Poetry and Culture

Jason Guriel

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Using humor, sarcasm, allegory, metaphor—and a little time travel—Guriel shows how poems succeed.

The Pigheaded Soul: Essays and Reviews on Poetry and Culture offers thoughtful and critical analyses of some of North America's most esteemed poets and their works. Jason Guriel's perceptive critiques are conveyed through poignant and pointed prose that more than effectively pinpoints his chief sources of displeasure and admiration.

This collection of essays begins with an examination of Canadian poet Daryl Hine and goes on to explore others, from Anne Carson to Dorothy Parker to Seamus Heaney. By discussing the literary quality of these poets' works, Guriel not only offers his educated opinion on which poets are the most successful but also explains in exacting detail *how* the poems succeed. His keen eye focuses line by line, even word by word, to dissect the craft of a poem, and he uses the same vigilance when considering the poet's entire body of work.

Guriel's lyrical language is host to an abundance of allegory and metaphor that perfectly harmonize the nature of each poet's work with the style they choose to employ (though you'll likely have to have read the poets of which Guriel speaks to truly understand what he's talking about): "[Eric Ormsby] collects animals, too, but he's poetry's most liberal zookeeper since Marianne Moore. Like Moore, he's not after big game; his poetry consistently sides with the underdogs and squatters who occupy all of those aforementioned cracks, crevices, corners and alcoves: arter snakes, moths, spiders—critters few hunters would want to bag and stuff. Ormsby, then, is not hunter; he's a pack rat, and his body of work is a richly musty flea market of poetic curios and near-obsolete words, lovingly collected."

The "and Culture" part of the book's subtitle comes in as Guriel often connects the intricacies of a poem to a larger context. For example, in the title essay, "The Pigheaded Soul," Guriel briefly investigates the naming and organizing of a collection of poems, observing that, speaking sarcastically from a future perspective, "titles of their books are borrowed from randomly deputized poems" and that "poetry collections were organized by narrative arcs, those starchy structures that feel to us, in the 2030s, as odd and constricting as the undergarments of an earlier, more decadent age." This essay also shows how Guriel can effectively use humor to reveal cultural shifts: "It was a weird time, the turn of the century. A majority of poets still taught in MFA programs as opposed to MBA programs (that's Master of Blogging Arts, of course)." Guriel never forgets that poets live in the context of their world rather than in some elusive literary universe.

Jason Guriel's own work has been published in *Slate*, *Parnassus*, *Reader's Digest*, and others, and he was the first Canadian poet to receive the Frederick Bock Prize from *Poetry* magazine, in 2007.

Guriel is a critic's critic (or, more specifically, a poetry critic's poetry critic). The audience for this book is decidedly slim: critics seeking examples on essay review craft and lessons on digging deep, and poets seeking to expand their writing techniques (though geared more toward pleasing readers and critics rather than expressing an image or emotion), will find insight in Guriel's analyses. Writers of prose, too, may benefit from looking past the seemingly limited content of the book and observing Guriel's melodic and effective language choices to discover new, inventive, awe-worthy ways of conveying an abstract idea.

AIMEE JODOIN (February 26, 2014)

Disclosure: This article is not an endorsement, but a review. The author of this book provided free copies of the book and paid a small fee to have

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