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Literary Collections

The Secret of Poetry: Essays
Mark Jarman
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This author was once the wise-fool of poetry criticism. His “Reaper Essays,” taken from the journal he co-edited with Rodney McDowell, was filled with an equal amount of hubris and whimsy. Years later Jarman’s newest collection of essays and reviews of poetry finds the author wise, but no fool.

Jarman reads with a poet’s depth and sensibility and the accuracy and historical scope of a great scholar. These essays and reviews challenge the conventional assumptions about poetic masters, literary criticism and its effect on students, the art of poetry, and—a topic Jarman has mastered—the use of narrative in lyric poetry.

The respect and open-mindedness with which the critic approaches his subjects shows a lifelong dedication to the art and craft of poetry. Not only does Jarman bring the hallowed ghosts of Eliot, Pound, Frost, and Stevens to new life, he justly entertains Jarrell, Berryman, Justice, and others from the middle-generation and discusses such hot-bed contemporaries like Jorie Graham, John Ashbury, and many others.

Much of the collection is concerned with re-establishing the American masters of narrative poetics. Seeking to balance the American canon, Jarman examines the work of Edwin Arlington Robinson and Robinson Jeffers. Narrative issues also infiltrate many of the reviews. If Jarman has a war drum, it would be to set a proper respect for the narrative tool of poetics.

The Secret of Poetry reflects a mind obsessed with the state of American poetry. This collection documents fifteen years of Jarman’s essay and review writing. There is a clear intelligence at work here that’s as vital and necessary as a heartbeat. Though he has grown more serious with age, Jarman’s prose has lost none of the delight that marked his earlier work. This volume adds an essential voice to serious craft-oriented criticism.

Michael Graber