

# The Sounds of Poetry: A Brief Guide

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The Poet Laureate's clear and entertaining account of how poetry works.

"Poetry is a vocal, which is to say a bodily, art," Robert Pinsky declares in *The Sounds of Poetry*. "The medium of poetry is the human body: the column of air inside the chest, shaped into signifying sounds in the larynx and the mouth. In this sense, poetry is as physical or bodily an art as dancing."

As Poet Laureate, Pinsky is one of America's best spokesmen for poetry. In this fascinating book, he explains how poets use the "technology" of poetry--its sounds--to create works of art that are "performed" in us when we read them aloud.

He devotes brief, informative chapters to accent and duration, syntax and line, like and unlike sounds, blank and free verse. He cites examples from the work of fifty different poets--from Shakespeare, Donne, and Herbert to W. C. Williams, Frost, Elizabeth Bishop, C. K. Williams, Louise Gluck, and Frank Bidart.

This ideal introductory volume belongs in the library of every poet and student of poetry.

While it's hardly the most traveled of literary destinations, poetry has suffered from no shortage of guidebooks. Still, these poetic baedekers tend to get bogged down in terminology and historical hairsplitting, while the actual music gets lost in the shuffle. We should be thankful, then, for Robert Pinsky's brief, wonderfully readable volume, in which he zooms in on verse as acoustic artifact: "When I say to myself a poem by Emily Dickinson or George Herbert, the artist's medium is my breath. The reader's breath and hearing embody the poet's words. This makes the art physical, intimate, vocal, and individual."

Not that Poet Laureate Pinsky gets vague or touchy-feely on us. Poetry, like God, is in the details, and the author starts with the building blocks, the amino acids, of verse: accent and duration. Even the most jaded of readers will benefit from his syllable-by-syllable examination of Thomas Campion's "Now Winter Nights Enlarge" and Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning." Moving on through discussions of syntax and line, meter and rhyme (or lack thereof), Pinsky enlists both the usual suspects (Shakespeare, Frost, Hardy, Eliot, Bishop) and some less customary ones (Gilbert & Sullivan, Louise Gluck, and the splendid James McMichael) to make his points. These poems are, in some sense, teaching tools for the author. Yet even his on-the-fly commentary causes us to see them in a new light. Here he is, for example, on the near-monotonous minimalism of W.C. Williams's "To a Poor Old Woman": "The poem dramatizes the taking in of a supposedly ordinary experience, and the playful, almost hectoring repetitions are like an effective sermon in praise of simplicity." *The Sounds of Poetry* is no less effective a sermon. It leaves your ear (and your heart) attuned to the pleasurable play of poetic language and persuades you that hearing is, indeed, believing. --James Marcus

Robert Pinsky is Poet Laureate of the United States. FSG published *The Inferno* of Dante in 1994 and *The Figured Wheel* in 1996. He teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University and lives in Newton Corner, Massachusetts.

#### Other Books

Perrine's *Sound and Sense*. A best-selling introduction to poetry for more than 50 years.

PERRINE'S SOUND AND SENSE: AN INTRODUCTION TO POETRY, 15e, succinctly covers the basics with detailed chapters on the elements of poetry, unique materials on evaluating poetry, exemplary selections, and exercises and study questions that guide understanding. Every chapter introduction bears the mark of Laurence Perrine's crisp, clean, and descriptive prose, and every poem selected as an example brings text concepts to life. With an emphasis on teaching students to read, understand, and evaluate poetry, this compact and concise anthology provides a systematic guide for discovering how and what a poem means. Its suggestions for writing also help students sort out their feelings and ideas, enabling them to assist others in sharing their experience. The 15th edition contains over 50 new poems, a new Featured Poet (Sylvia Plath), and a new poet in the Contemporary Collection (Louise Gluck).

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