

Twenty Poems That Could Save America

written by Guest Contributor | January 28, 2015



Twenty Poems That Could Save America by Tony Hoagland

Graywolf Press, November 2014

256 pages – [Graywolf](#) / [Amazon](#)

Tony Hoagland's collection of essays on poetry, *Twenty Poems That Could Save America*, should be read more widely. Everyone who already reads poetry, and the twice as many who write it, will enjoy Hoagland's new book, which could also be enjoyed by non-poets, such as teachers and writers of other forms, and those literate folks who might just like to learn a little about what this poetry stuff is all about—all those who might be 'poetry-curious' but who get discouraged by the plethora of impenetrable poetry and poetry criticism written by academics in their gated community universities who claim that their poetry is poetry. But Hoagland, over a series of highly readable and smart essays, argues for the *real* American poetry, for the value of it both as a pleasurable reading experience (who would have thought someone would have to come along and argue for reading poetry being pleasurable?) and as a thing especially valuable to American culture.

Tony Hoagland teaches at two different MFA programs, and has been fairly prolific in publishing essays like these in journals like *American Poetry Review* and *Writer's Chronicle*. His previous collection of essays, *Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft*, was just as interesting. And on top of all that, he still finds time to publish his own poetry regularly, most recently *Unincorporated Persons in the Late Honda Dynasty*, the title of which will give you a sense of what his style is like, or at least how to read him—that he does incorporate humor. A few years ago he achieved what all poets hope to achieve—controversy—by writing about race in America, and by having some of his readers misread the "I" in some of his poems as him, and not a fictional speaker used to make a point about racism.

Besides all that, he's doing what the director of my MFA program, Robert Polito at The New School for Social Research, wants from budding poets: to not only write poetry but write about it, in order to have some input into the Discourse (Academic and East Coast) over what (good) poetry actually is, or does.

What does Hoagland think good poetry is? Well, that's a little like trying to define poetry, period, which is strangely impossible. But! The first few essays in *Twenty Poems* show how interested Hoagland is with poetry that swims in American dialect. First in "diction," which could be really about word choice, and Hoagland is definitely in agreement with the old Mark Twain quote: "Why say 'metropolis' when you can say 'city'?"

He also discusses the idea of idiom ("Idiom, Our Funny Valentine"), which is kind of the use of (in this case American) slang, though not quite—it's more about the use of common phrases, phrases we take for granted, like the phrase

“take for granted,” that haven’t always existed in English but that tend to leave English language learners scratching their heads (over phrases like “scratching their heads.”) He’s not arguing for using clichés in poetry, and he very much thinks poetry needs to “make it new” (like Pound said almost 100 years ago) but he revels (as I do) in common speech, and makes an impassioned argument that contemporary American poetry comes from poets who used common idioms, not all of them American:

“What names come to mind? E. E. Cummings, Anne Sexton, Carl Sandburg, Frank O’Hara, Robert Frost, Nikki Giovanni, Catullus, Constantine Cavafy, Amiri Baraka, Wislawa Szymborska, Charles Bukowski, William Stafford, Diane Wakoski, Billy Collins. These are the poets who, more and less, use a style that calculatedly draws on the glamour of familiarity. They are the ones who rejoice in the milieu of the contemporary, convinced that the local, the regional, and the transient have a poetic flavor and representational legitimacy equal to more elevated, denatured, universal language.”

If you are one of the poetry-curious, this list of names is as good a place as any to start reading some good poetry, and though Hoagland acknowledges that some (if not all) are sniffed at by the East Coast literati, he also points out that these poets are the ones most responsible for drawing people into poetry, even if some of those people may abandon them later on. I personally didn’t think I really liked poetry until I discovered Bukowski.

Another pleasure of Hoagland’s *Twenty Poems That Could Save America*, and another reason to read the book, is that it’s a miniature anthology of good contemporary poems, many of which I was not familiar with. Each essay contains at least three or more poems from three or more poets, most quoted in their entirety. That’s a testament to the range of the poetry world that someone like me, who considers himself somewhat well read, and interested in the same aesthetic tradition as Hoagland, can still be discovering treasures. All of the poems are what I call ‘gettable,’ of the kind Hoagland is arguing for, meaning they use that accessible American dialect/idiom/vernacular/style. Though it’s more than all that. Whatever it is, Hoagland traces it, in his essay “I Do This, I Do That” to the New York School of poetics, which includes John Ashbury and Kenneth Koch but which Hoagland centers (correctly, I believe) on Frank O’Hara, for both the humor, and energy, and:

...the coy mannerism of distractedness, often embodies in the device of...disjunction and non sequitur....[and] an affect of goofy personal ineptitude that effectively precludes stances of both tragedy and heroism—offering, instead, the charms of melancholy and cluelessness as characteristic poses.

As an aside, that’s about as academic-y as Hoagland gets. Most of the rest of the essays model exactly what Hoagland argues for in poetry: a casual but still smart accessibility, though the quote above is actually a critique of some of the excesses in certain strains of younger contemporary poets, those he effectively labels in another essay as the Dean Young clones (my wording). Because the down side of a little humor and common idioms, etc., is a lack of depth. What can end up being valued is cleverness, when poetry heavyweights

like Galway Kinnell and W. S. Merwin are wrestling with the gods, what philosopher Heidegger thought was the highest duty of poetry, to engage in the making of Being—ours and Being in general.

Heady stuff, which actually Hoagland doesn't go into, though I don't think he'd deny that Merwin and Kinnell are great poets. Still, they're not mentioned. And they're actually pretty accessible, if serious. No, the real enemies for Hoagland are the LANGUAGE poets, who revel in dis-making meaning in language, or the language of the oppressors. Hoagland would argue, Well, what do we do once we've dismantled language? We still need to communicate. Yes, and communicating with each is a pleasure! Playing with language in a way that is still (easily) understandable to everyone (not just academic snobs) is a high pleasure. And, Hoagland further argues, poetry might just have more practical uses too.

The collection builds to the final essay, from which the book takes its name. Originally published in Harper's online, Hoagland definitely has an agenda, based not so preposterously around the premise of the title. Hoagland argues, rightly I think, that "we" have failed to bring poetry to the masses, in particular by not including it in our public school agenda, which can only be accomplished (he argues) by having a 'core curriculum' that all people, in all America can reference. This core, he argues, needs to be updated to something more contemporary than Pound's "In The Metro" and anything by Dickinson or even William Carlos Williams, not because those poems are bad, but because they're old, and we, potential-future-poetry readers, tend to read backwards, from poems that speak to us in our own era's language, to where they came from, those poems' ancestors.

He then goes on to perform the audacious and impossible act of proposing a possible list of poems for that core, with descriptions of possible theoretical situations in which they might be of use in the Real World. Just for one example, William Stafford's classic "Traveling Through The Dark" as an example of not-easy choices in life, with an imaginary conversation between Washington politicians using the poem as a reference for how to approach passing (or not) a budget bill. 'As if,' we all sigh....

Not to say all the poems on his list are squeaky new: Whitman's "I Heard The Learned Astronomer" makes it in as a lesson to future Race to The Top participants on the pleasure of concentrated and conscious anti-intellectualism, though Hoagland might be cheered to know that I read this actual poem in one of my early K-12 English books in Michigan 35 years ago. One down, nineteen to go!

The cover of *Twenty Poems* features an old black and white photograph of an elephant trunk reaching out over a wall to touch a human hand, which is a reference to the now infamous quote from a certain academic named Roman Jakobson who, in response to novelist Vladimir Nabokov being hired by Harvard to teach literature, exclaimed, "Should an elephant teach zoology?" Meaning, snarkily, that writers don't, or shouldn't, teach—that *that* requires an academic. Well, that didn't go down well with writers, and there has been a certain enmity in English departments in America ever since. Hoagland shows that not only can one be a good writer (and, gasp, a poet of all things) but

that being so is maybe the best qualification to teach not just creative writing, but also creative writing already published—that is, literature.

Key to the cover photo, though, is the reaching out: *Twenty Poems That Could Save America* is an elephant/poet's offering, especially to those who might think themselves non-poets, of and for contact, for some sharing of thoughts on poetry, in an accessible, non-academic, and at times humorous way.

✘ Born in Puerto Rico, **John Yohe** grew up in Michigan, and currently lives in Portland, Oregon. He has worked as a wildland firefighter, deckhand/oiler, runner/busboy, bike messenger, wilderness ranger, and fire lookout, as well as a teacher of writing. A complete list of his publications, and poetry, fiction and non-fiction writing samples, can be found at his website: www.johnyohe.com