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Robert Frost

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He moves in darkness as it seems to me, Not of woods only and the shade of trees. He will not go behind his father's saying, And he likes having thought of it so well He says again, "Good fences make good neighbours."

North of Boston Details

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From Reader Review *North of Boston* for online ebook

Rob says

I don't know what it was exactly about *North of Boston* that made it better than Frost's first book, *A Boy's Will*. Perhaps it's more human than the previous collection. That may be the wrong way to put it, but *North of Boston* captures something about the human spirit that was missing from *A Boy's Will*. Most of the poems in this latter collection are lengthy, narrative pieces with dialogue, which may begin to explain the difference. Perhaps by creating characters (which are admittedly flat, and nondescript) Frost instilled these poems with an empathic voice that draws in readers and allows us to become part of the poem.

It was mostly enjoyable to read, a few of the poems were a little tiresome to me, but several were absolute gold.

Here's my favorite passage from "The Black Cottage":

For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favour.

That sentiment rings especially true for me. I think I will be revisiting these poems again in the future.

Scott Austin says

A couple classics and some interesting narrative poems, mostly dialogue.

Julie says

My sister was here this past weekend, and, as we sat outside visiting on a perfect autumn day, we started discussing Frost's early collection of poetry, **North of Boston**. My sister had already read and reviewed it, and she loved it, and I . . . well, I just *liked* it.

Why did I like it, instead of love it? Was I a Frost fan or wasn't I? Was I *dissing* Robert Frost?

Given the nature of same-gender siblings, I was pretty sure that one of us was going to end up face down in the fallen leaves, or in hand-to-hand combat, if we didn't change the subject soon.

So, folks, I will tell you what I told my sister. I love Robert Frost. I love him, y'all. So let's all calm the heck down.

(And, as an aside, may I point out for a moment how refreshing it was that we were NOT arguing about Donald Trump?)

But, here's my problem. . . of the 17 poems in this collection, each poem is, on average, 4.5 pages long. And, other than a few old, familiar friends, such as *Mending Wall*, *Blueberries*, and *After Apple Picking*, the other poems here are long, unfamiliar, and. . . in my opinion, a bit tedious.

All of the poems are comprised of sharp and intentional language (Frost never lets you down there), but they read far more like sections of dialogue within a short story and far less like images or moods that deliver a punch.

I just didn't fall in love here and this wasn't my preference. But, don't worry, I'm off to discover **The Road Not Taken and Other Poems**. I'm sure it will steer me back to love.

Ted says

Something there is that doesn't love a wall...

Good fences make good neighbors.

4 ½

This second collection of sixteen poems was published the year after Frost's first one. It must be the case that most, if not all, were written in the years preceding, and were just waiting to be assembled together by the writer and loosed on the world. The title refers to the small-town, rural New England, the state of New Hampshire. Frost had a farm here which his grandfather had bought for him, at which he and his family lived for several years before moving to England for a couple years. While in England the first two collections of his poetry were published.

My friend Alan comments below about my rating of 4. I've raised it a bit, but like an Olympic judge, I would like to leave room for a higher rating for a later collection. Was this really Frost's greatest collection? Maybe so. (I guess I'm also still a bit bemused by the poetry I found here.)

Below, I quote 3 poems complete, and offer very short descriptions of the others. Sixteen is not a large number of poems – but there are a *lot* of poetic lines here, many of the poems being over 100 lines long.

One thing I realized after reading a few of them, was that these are poems of the *particular*. Much poetry is of a more general nature, advancing themes of a summer day, or a failed relationship, etc. More later.

The opening poem is one of Frost's iconic poems, having a few lines that are familiar to millions. These are in bold below.

MENDING WALL

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.
The work of hunters is another thing:
I have come after them and made repair
Where they have left not one stone on a stone,
But they would have the rabbit out of hiding,
To please the yelping dogs. The gaps I mean,
No one has seen them made or heard them made,
But at spring mending-time we find them there.
I let my neighbor know beyond the hill;
And on a day we meet to walk the line
And set the wall between us once again.
We keep the wall between us as we go.
To each the boulders that have fallen to each.
And some are loaves and some so nearly balls
We have to use a spell to make them balance:
"Stay where you are until our backs are turned!"
We wear our fingers rough with handling them.
Oh, just another kind of outdoor game,
One on a side. It comes to little more:
There where it is we do not need the wall:
He is all pine and I am apple orchard.
My apples trees will never get across
And eat the cones under his pines, I tell him.
He only says, "**Good fences make good neighbors.**"
Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder
If I could put a notion in his head:
"Why do they make good neighbors? Isn't it
Where there are cows? But here there are no cows.
Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offense.
Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down." I could say "Elves" to him,
But it's not elves exactly, and I'd rather
He said it for himself. I see him there,
Bringing a stone grasped firmly by the top
In each hand, like an old-stone savage armed.
He moves in darkness as it seems to me,
Not of woods only and the shade of trees.
He will not go behind his father's saying,
And he likes having thought of it so well
He says again, "**Good fences make good neighbors.**"

The bolded lines are both very familiar to me, hardly any of the rest of it. But they the second two seem to directly contradict the first. I'm not sure that I ever really associated the two different sentiments with a

single poem. But the poem, being about *walls*, seems general enough – though couched in the particular first-person narrator.

Now, however, come the short stories. Pages long. About particular folks. Folks who speak to one another, poems made of nothing but dialogue. Who ever thought of such a thing. Homer?

THE DEATH OF THE HIRED MAN

166 lines, dialogue between a man and a woman.

THE MOUNTAIN

109 lines, dialogue between two men who don't know one another.

A HUNDRED COLLARS

180 lines, with three speakers: a hotel clerk, and (mostly) two men forced to share a room.

HOME BURIAL

116 lines, man and wife. This one has the feel of a Lydia Davis ominous tale – man and wife pried apart rather than brought together by a life changing event,

The next is mostly a monologue, on memory and truth.

THE BLACK COTTAGE

WE chanced in passing by that afternoon
To catch it in a sort of special picture
Among tar-banded ancient cherry trees,
Set well back from the road in rank lodged grass,
The little cottage we were speaking of, 5
A front with just a door between two windows,
Fresh painted by the shower a velvet black.
We paused, the minister and I, to look.
He made as if to hold it at arm's length
Or put the leaves aside that framed it in. 10
“Pretty,” he said. “Come in. No one will care.”
The path was a vague parting in the grass
That led us to a weathered window-sill.
We pressed our faces to the pane. “You see,” he said,
“Everything’s as she left it when she died. 15
Her sons won’t sell the house or the things in it.
They say they mean to come and summer here
Where they were boys. They haven’t come this year.
They live so far away—one is out west—
It will be hard for them to keep their word. 20
Anyway they won’t have the place disturbed.”
A buttoned hair-cloth lounge spread scrolling arms
Under a crayon portrait on the wall
Done sadly from an old daguerreotype.

“That was the father as he went to war. 25
She always, when she talked about war,
Sooner or later came and leaned, half knelt
Against the lounge beside it, though I doubt
If such unlikelike lines kept power to stir
Anything in her after all the years. 30
He fell at Gettysburg or Fredericksburg,
I ought to know—it makes a difference which:
Fredericksburg wasn’t Gettysburg, of course.
But what I’m getting to is how forsaken
A little cottage this has always seemed; 35
Since she went more than ever, but before—
I don’t mean altogether by the lives
That had gone out of it, the father first,
Then the two sons, till she was left alone.
(Nothing could draw her after those two sons. 40
She valued the considerate neglect
She had at some cost taught them after years.)
I mean by the world’s having passed it by—
As we almost got by this afternoon.
It always seems to me a sort of mark 45
To measure how far fifty years have brought us.
Why not sit down if you are in no haste?
These doorsteps seldom have a visitor.
The warping boards pull out their own old nails
With none to tread and put them in their place. 50
She had her own idea of things, the old lady.
And she liked talk. She had seen Garrison
And Whittier, and had her story of them.
One wasn’t long in learning that she thought
Whatever else the Civil War was for 55
It wasn’t just to keep the States together,
Nor just to free the slaves, though it did both.
She wouldn’t have believed those ends enough
To have given outright for them all she gave.
Her giving somehow touched the principle 60
That all men are created free and equal.
And to hear her quaint phrases—so removed
From the world’s view to-day of all those things.
That’s a hard mystery of Jefferson’s.
What did he mean? Of course the easy way 65
Is to decide it simply isn’t true.
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.
But never mind, the Welshman got it planted
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.
Each age will have to reconsider it. 70
You couldn’t tell her what the West was saying,
And what the South to her serene belief.
She had some art of hearing and yet not

Hearing the latter wisdom of the world.
White was the only race she ever knew. 75
Black she had scarcely seen, and yellow never.
But how could they be made so very unlike
By the same hand working in the same stuff?
She had supposed the war decided that.
What are you going to do with such a person? 80
Strange how such innocence gets its own way.
I shouldn't be surprised if in this world
It were the force that would at last prevail.
Do you know but for her there was a time
When to please younger members of the church, 85
Or rather say non-members in the church,
Whom we all have to think of nowadays,
I would have changed the Creed a very little?
Not that she ever had to ask me not to;
It never got so far as that; but the bare thought 90
Of her old tremulous bonnet in the pew,
And of her half asleep was too much for me.
Why, I might wake her up and startle her.
It was the words 'descended into Hades'
That seemed too pagan to our liberal youth. 95
You know they suffered from a general onslaught.
And well, if they weren't true why keep right on
Saying them like the heathen? We could drop them.
Only—there was the bonnet in the pew.
Such a phrase couldn't have meant much to her. 100
But suppose she had missed it from the Creed
As a child misses the unsaid Good-night,
And falls asleep with heartache—how should I feel?
I'm just as glad she made me keep hands off,
For, dear me, why abandon a belief 105
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.
Most of the change we think we see in life
Is due to truths being in and out of favour. 110
As I sit here, and oftentimes, I wish
I could be monarch of a desert land
I could devote and dedicate forever
To the truths we keep coming back and back to.
So desert it would have to be, so walled 115
By mountain ranges half in summer snow,
No one would covet it or think it worth
The pains of conquering to force change on.
Scattered oases where men dwelt, but mostly
Sand dunes held loosely in tamarisk 120
Blown over and over themselves in idleness.
Sand grains should sugar in the natal dew

The babe born to the desert, the sand storm
Retard mid-waste my cowering caravans—

“There are bees in this wall.” He struck the clapboards, 125
Fierce heads looked out; small bodies pivoted.
We rose to go. Sunset blazed on the windows.

BLUEBERRIES

105 lines, dialogue with every couplet or triplet of lines (irregular) rhyming!

A SERVANT TO SERVANTS

178 lines, one person's thoughts. Very strange.

AFTER APPLE PICKING

Short (43 lines) inner monologue.

THE CODE

108 lines, starts and ends as dialogue, but in between one relates a long personal story.

THE GENERATIONS OF MEN

212 lines. Another short story, in dialogue of two. With an end of some promise, but who can know?
Introduced by a narrator, then becomes a dialogue between strangers, man and woman who discover they're related.

THE HOUSEKEEPER

216 lines. You forget you're reading a poem, but when you think, you know it is a poem, you're not just reading sentences. Dialogue, with the person being discussed joining in near the end.

THE FEAR

94 lines, similar to the previous, but even creepier dialogue, with a third joining in at the end.

THE SELF-SEEKER

228 lines, mostly a dialogue; a third comes, then goes. This one took me a long while to figure out who the male speaker was, who the female.

THE WOOD-PILE

Short. 40 lines, very little speaking, maybe four lines of monologue.

And finally, the second book-end, the book-ends offering little clue to the iconoclastic (?) poetry in between.

GOOD HOURS

I had for my winter evening walk –
No one at all with whom to talk,
But I had the cottages in a row

Up to their shining eyes in snow.

And I thought I had the folk within:
I had the sound of a violin;
I had a glimpse through curtain laces
Of youthful forms and youthful faces.

I had such company outward bound.
I went till there were no cottages found.
I turned and repented, but coming back
I saw no window but that was black.

Over the snow my creaking feet
Disturbed the slumbering village street
Like profanation, by your leave,
At ten o'clock of a winter eve.

As if to cap all the enigmatic talk with a straightforward, "That's that!"

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Previous review: The Poetry of Robert Frost

Random review: StarCraft II

Next review: How to Read a Book *Mortimer Adler*

Previous library review: A Boy's Will

Next library review: Mountain Interval

Tagcaver says

My only previous exposure to Robert Frost was his poem, "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening." This book opened my eyes to a different form of poetry. I loved the stories told in verse, and experienced them as a new discovery on my part.

Stopping By Woods continues to be my favorite, but I have now more poems to enjoy.

Edmund Davis-Quinn says

So far it seems like Robert Frost is one of many poets I want to like more than I do. So it goes. Readable but didn't grab me.

Gary says

"The Pasture," a two stanza poem, is another of those perfect works that uses only the words that are required to create only the lines that are required to constitute only the required stanzas to create perfect images that exactly fit together, but no sense of stinginess with words follows; no sense of erasing and editing down, down, down, falls; no sense of a minimalist having minimized shrinks a postcard into a pixel. Exactly natural beauty somehow comes just right, like the wonder of a joyful birth, from Robert Frost's pen. I've watched a content and concerned old horseman saddle up his horse on a frosty morning, doing everything just right, showing a love of his horse, a pride in the saddle being right, not exactly smiling but showing every other sign of happiness, and the horse seemed happy, too. This poem is like that, to me.

Carl Williams says

I've come to be fond of Frost though, to be honest, my inclination toward him has ebbed and flowed over the years. I first read "Mending Wall" in tenth grade, as part of a poetry unit in English. Mrs. Sanborn pushed some of us into symbolism and held the reigns on others of us to not go too far. A few years ago, at a colleague's memorial service, one of her students read "After Apple Picking," thanking her for saving him.

"There were ten thousand thousand fruit to touch,
Cherish in hand, lift down, and not let fall.
For all that struck the earth,
No matter if not bruised or spiked with stubble,
Went surely to the cider-apple heap
As of no worth."

This is sad and wistful collection. Dark, and full of humanity. There's "The Death of the Hired Man:"
"Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'
"I should have called it
Something you somehow haven't to deserve."

He catches loss, and fear, and a yearning for what was as well as what might have been. My additional favorites—"Home Burial" and "The Wood-pile"

Illiterate says

These poems often showcase tensions between a more intellectual and a more earthy voice.

Heather says

Actually reading ebook version from Project Gutenberg but couldn't find that one listed...

Bill Kerwin says

The title *North of Boston* refers to Derry, New Hampshire, where Robert Frost and his family worked a farm for twelve lean and very cold years, years when Frost composed at least the first draft of many of these poems, but it also alludes to the great shift of cultural attitudes you encounter—or once encountered—as you move from the intellectual life of Boston to the pastoral atmosphere of New Hampshire and Vermont.

Frost is too organic a writer to develop things schematically. Sometimes, as in “A Hundred Collars” or “The Black Cottage,” the “Boston” voice is that of a university professor or a clergyman. More often, as in “The Death of the Hired Man,” “Home Burial,” “A Servant to Servants,” “The Housekeeper,” and “The Fear,” it is the voice of a sensitive, imaginative woman controlled—sometimes consumed—by the unrelenting realism of farm life and farm men. On the other hand, the voice may sometimes be an interloper or a stranger: a traveler who views “The Mountain” as a tourist does, a new farmer who does not understand that farmers with large families have a greater claim on wild “Blueberries” they pick to survive, the farmer/employer who fails to understand the hired man's “Code,” or the more educated farmer/neighbor of “Mending Wall.” Each of these situations is complex and nuanced, and rarely—as happens in “Blueberries”—are the attitudes reconciled or resolved.

There are an extraordinary number of masterpieces here. I'll let you count them for yourself. I'll only add two things: 1) a poem I did not mention, “Apple Picking,” about fulfillment and exhaustion, ecstasy and death, but mostly about a job well done, is certainly one of those masterpieces, and 2) as conventional as these blank verse monologues may seem, they are extraordinary in the way they combine an unforced iambic movement with the rhythms and diction of everyday speech. No poet in any age—and that includes Shakespeare—has done this sort of thing better than Frost.

To conclude, I'll end with an example of some of Frost's wonderfully natural blank verse from one of the book's lesser—but still very fine—poems, “The Self-seeker.” Here the title character, an injured mill worker who is planning this morning to settle his claim against the company—far too cheaply—discusses with his friend Willis the nature of the accident.

*"What does he think?--How are the blessed feet?
The doctor's sure you're going to walk again?"
"He thinks I'll hobble. It's both legs and feet."
"They must be terrible--I mean to look at."
"I haven't dared to look at them uncovered.
Through the bed blankets I remind myself
Of a starfish laid out with rigid points."
"The wonder is it hadn't been your head."
"It's hard to tell you how I managed it.
When I saw the shaft had me by the coat,*

*I didn't try too long to pull away,
Or fumble for my knife to cut away,
I just embraced the shaft and rode it out--
Till Weiss shut off the water in the wheel-pit.
That's how I think I didn't lose my head.
But my legs got their knocks against the ceiling."
"Awful. Why didn't they throw off the belt
Instead of going clear down in the wheel-pit?"
"They say some time was wasted on the belt--
Old streak of leather--doesn't love me much
Because I make him spit fire at my knuckles,
The way Ben Franklin used to make the kite-string.
That must be it. Some days he won't stay on.
That day a woman couldn't coax him off.
He's on his rounds now with his tail in his mouth
Snatched right and left across the silver pulleys.
Everything goes the same without me there.
You can hear the small buzz saws whine, the big saw
Caterwaul to the hills around the village
As they both bite the wood. It's all our music.
One ought as a good villager to like it.
No doubt it has a sort of prosperous sound,
And it's our life."
"Yes, when it's not our death."
"You make that sound as if it wasn't so
With everything. What we live by we die by.
I wonder where my lawyer is. His train's in.
I want this over with. I'm hot and tired."*

Steven says

With North of Boston, Frost begins in earnest his foray into the poetics of local narrative. As an experiment in the meter of common speech, I find it interesting, but none of the poems are really moving, as in his other books. "Home Burial" is probably the most powerful and least reliant on gothic tragedy to round out its story. Of course, "Mending Wall" is the poem we know and love--but not so much for the sound of it, I mean the kind of richly crafted music you come to expect of Frost in later books. "Mending Wall" pricks our rationality: why do we fence each other out of our lives, etc.? Many of the other poems in the book read more like experiments than poems. We can see Frost thinking on the page, and that's never good. As Yeats famously said: "A line will take us hours maybe; / Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought, / our stitching and unstitching has been naught." Every now and then, however, Frost loosens up a bit:

From "After Apple-Picking":

One can see what will trouble
this sleep of mine, whatever sleep it is.
Were he not gone,
the woodchuck could say whether it's like his

long sleep, as I describe its coming on,
or just some human sleep.

Joyce Oliver stahle says

Excellent!

Robert Frost must have experienced first hand a lot of what he wrote about. It brought tears while reading several of the poems.

He has a great way of painting a picture. When I was reading "Apple Pickin' " I could actually visualize it.

Werner says

Even readers who aren't into poetry themselves usually recognize Frost's name as one of the giants of 20th-century American (and indeed world) poetry. This collection is one of his earliest (originally published in 1914), and is relatively short, with just 15 poems; but it's sufficient to demonstrate to readers who appreciate poetry that his stature is deserved.

Fiction tends to be my favorite literary form; I'm attracted to the idea of story, which is the essence of fiction. Not surprisingly, my favorite poems tend to be narrative poetry, which also tell stories (with a point). A good deal of Frost's poetry falls into this category, narrations of an incident (sometimes at some length, as in "The Death of the Hired Man"). He draws his material mainly from the daily life of his New Hampshire farm or the broader everyday life of rural New England and its natural world, and expresses himself in simple, accessible language; but in true poetic fashion, the poems have hidden depths that use the mundane surface to bring out pithy observations on the human condition. While much modern poetry is dominated by free verse, Frost sticks strictly to rhymed, metered poetry (he once observed that he would "as lief play tennis with the net down" as write free verse), and he handles the formal structure with consummate, unobtrusive artistry.

It's been 20 years or so since I read this collection, and at the time I didn't make notes on the individual poems; so I can't critique many of them in depth here. "Mending Wall" remains my personal favorite; I would rank "The Death of the Hired Man," and "After Apple-Picking" as among the best as well. But the quality of the collection as a whole is consistently high. I would absolutely recommend it to any readers who like poetry --and even to venturesome readers who presently think that they *don't* like poetry!

Weiyi says

???Frost??

John Hosmer says

I don't think this 3 star review properly does this book justice. I'm sure it's deserving of more. But, I've never read poetry before and am attempting to broaden my literary borders and I've always loved the shorter works

I've read from Frost. This boon is good and the poetry in it is beautiful - I just don't find poetry as compelling to read as some do.

Christine Boyer says

Not excited about reading a collection of poems? How can I excite you, then?

How about this - do you like the short story format? Well, these early poems of Frost's are some of his longer, mostly non-rhyming (though still following meter, but don't get caught up in those kinds of specifics unless you need to or want to) poems that read more like a short story. A super powerful knock-your-socks-off short story! Couples, friends, neighbors having conversations - remember those? Conversations that make you THINK! Or cry ("Home Burial") or laugh ("Hundred Collars").

Or how about this - do you enjoy nature and the outdoors? Frost's poems will take you there and remind you of the beauty in the simplicity of your own backyard ("Blueberries") .

Or how about this - do you like spending hours on Facebook "checking out" what others are doing? Hey, Frost covered that kind of eavesdropping years before in ("The Code") and ("The Housekeeper") **well, minus the Instagram photos.

You know what? The best way to get excited about Robert Frost is to just read his poems! This book might be a good start, but in his long 89 years, there's plenty of material. His work stands on its own! One of my favorite things about his poetry is it allows the READER to go as deep or shallow as they want. Because it's great stuff at all levels. Now THAT'S exciting!

Janet says

I like Frost but haven't read him in years. As always, love his rhymes and rhythms. But this time struck by how his poems reminded me of other writers.

This passage from "Black Cottage":

*For, dear me, why abandon a belief
Merely because it ceases to be true.
Cling to it long enough, and not a doubt
It will turn true again, for so it goes.*

made me think of Kurt Vonnegut.

When reading lines such as the ones below from "Blueberries" I'll be darned if I don't hear Dr Seuss:

*He has brought them all up on wild berries, they say,
Like birds. They store a great many away.
They eat them the year round, and those they don't eat
They sell in the store and buy shoes for their feet."*

Lastly, the confrontation between the grieving parents of "Home Burial" could have come straight out of a Raymond Carver short story. Except Frost wrote this poem decades before Carver was born.

A perfect read for a rainy Sunday afternoon.

Linked to this edition because I liked the cover and couldn't find an edition that credited Project Gutenberg, which is where I obtained my ecopy.

Kirsten Kinnell says

I haven't read Frost since high school. I'm blown away with everything I hadn't noticed before. Loved every second of it.

Rozzer says

Almost without exception (thinking, thinking - no, entirely without exception), those books, poems and plays taught to me at some point in K-12 produced, like vaccines, almost life-long resistance to the works involved. Luckily, my long life since then has been long enough to permit me, in some cases, to outgrow that vicious old repulsion to at least some of those items. (Sorry, Hamlet!) And the poems of North of Boston are most definitely included.

There are those who take exception to Frost's personality and values. And so would I were Frost to have been a novelist. But he was a poet, and poetry (it would appear) is, like painting or sculpture, immune to the personal qualities of its authors. Frost's works in North of Boston are as breathtaking and groundbreaking as Eliot's or Wordsworth's. His lines are as sharp and crisp as a sunny New England winter morning. No. Regardless of the gruesome mud (if not worse) slung by my ninth-grade English teacher, Frost, like the Star Spangled Banner, is still there, still fresh, forever fresh to those willing to seriously read and quietly listen. This book is worthy of your time and attention. Having read it, you will carry it with you for your life.
