

The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai

Yehuda Amichai , Robert Alter (Editor)

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The largest English-language collection to date from Israel's finest poet

Few poets have demonstrated as persuasively as Yehuda Amichai why poetry matters. One of the major poets of the twentieth century, Amichai created remarkably accessible poems, vivid in their evocation of the Israeli landscape and historical predicament, yet universally resonant. His are some of the most moving love poems written in any language in the past two generations—some exuberant, some powerfully erotic, many suffused with sadness over separation that casts its shadow on love. In a country torn by armed conflict, these poems poignantly assert the preciousness of private experience, cherished under the repeated threats of violence and death.

Amichai's poetry has attracted a variety of gifted English translators on both sides of the Atlantic from the 1960s to the present. Assembled by the award-winning Hebrew scholar and translator Robert Alter, *The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai* is by far the largest selection of the master poet's work to appear in English, gathering the best of the existing translations as well as offering English versions of many previously untranslated poems. With this collection, Amichai's vital poetic voice is now available to English readers as it never has been before.

The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai Details

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From Reader Review The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai for online ebook

Christine says

A Hebrew poet who wrote intimately about Judaism, Jerusalem, and the body, Amichai moved from Germany to Palestine with his parents in 1936, when he was 12. The area was wracked with wars throughout his life and they are a frequent topic of his poetry. As is his pubic hair. An evocative poem about grief and the passage of time might be followed by one talking about genitalia. Sex. Or childhood. Amichai plays with grammar and syntax as much as rhyme scheme, and my hat is off to the translators who have to massage these complicated images from one language to another. Overall, the poetry is very accessible and you can glean a reasonable amount of meaning from it in one or two readings. The only things I didn't like was the incessant pubic hair and his representation of women; they often were presented as just extensions of the male viewer/narrators's desires and not as separate, autonomous beings. A weirdly one-dimensional portrayal. Despite that, his work is a creative and interesting addition to the poetry pantheon, and worth taking a look at.

Lorri says

Yehudi Amichai's poetry strikes at my very core.

His illuminations and ruminating prose is intense, yet gentle, often bold, yet with a caring voice. He reflects on many issues, that are pertinent not only in moments past, but also in today's world.

Social justice/injustice, love and loss, Holocaust and anger, sex, children, women, the military, Jerusalem, daily life, and so much more are woven within the tapestry of his beautiful poems.

It is difficult to articulate my thoughts and feelings regarding "The Poetry of Yehudi Amichai".

Suffice it to say that, although the copy I read was an e-book, from my library, I have ordered a hardcopy for my personal library.

That should say it all.

Randall says

For me, Amichai's strongest poems are those that focus on and explore a single metaphor. "Jacob and the Angel" and "Air Hostess" do this very well. While this collection is exhaustive in covering Amichai over the years, that same comprehensiveness also shows how often the poet covers the same topics with the same language over and over again. Or, conversely, how quickly he switches metaphors from one line to the next leaving this reader dizzy or left behind altogether.

Jsavett1 says

A collection of the sublime. Upon completing this selected (it's NOT a Collected) and The Selected Poetry of Yehuda Amichai edited by Bloch and Mitchell, I can say without reservation that Amichai has skyrocketed into position as one of my favorite poets of all time. The HUGE advantage of this text over the Bloch and Mitchell is the inclusion of poems from Amichai's magisterial last work Open, Closed, Open. The poems selected from that collection are some of the finest I've ever read in any language. They are funny and sad and full of longing. Those ALONE are worth the price of this book. I defy anyone who loves poetry and life to read the poems in Open, Closed, Open and NOT feel like you've been as in touch with the sublime as listening to Mozart and Beethoven, standing before a Rothko, or at the foot of a sequoia.

Alter, the translator of Jewish texts par excellence recently, has also INCLUDED some of the translations of from Bloch and Mitchell, so this text has that going for it as well. THAT SAID, there are MANY poems in the Bloch and Mitchell Selected which are NOT included here which are TREMENDOUS. This merely speaks to the need (am I being too demanding after getting this gift from Alter?) for a Collected for Amichai. In the meantime, buying both books is well worth the money.

I'm left wondering why Amichai never received a Nobel? It's certainly not an issue with the quality of his work or his prolificacy. Obviously, politics plays a role in such decisions, but I can sleep at night knowing that Amichai won his share of awards, and more importantly, is held with tremendous love and respect in the hearts of his poetry peers.

Rick says

Amichai died in 2000. His first collection of poems appeared in Israel in 1955 and by 1965 he was recognized not just as a major Israeli poet but one of the great poets of contemporary world literature. This edition brings together the most complete edition of his poetry available in English, edited by Robert Alter, who selected translations from among previous published editions or, when none were satisfactorily available, commissioned translations from among the best living translators of Amichai's work. Among the translators, in addition to Alter, are Chana Bloch, Chana Kronfeld, Ted Hughes, Steven Mitchell, Leon Wieseltier, Glenda Abramson, Harold Schimmel, and the author himself.

As a retrospective it is beyond impressive and only reminds us that Amichai's greatness wasn't just global but timeless. The first poems in this collection talk about his childhood and first experiences in the military, including the War for Independence in 1948, and the last poems are about mortality and his children's military service. "Even my loves," he writes, "are measured by wars." In between the poems about love and war are poems about peace, God and faith, sex and marriage, memory and history, and of life and death. I can't speak to the innovations in use of vernacular Hebrew that Amichai is credited with but I do know even in translation the poems sing. His language is the music of joy, fear, sorrow, regret, dispute, love, remorse, outrage, doubt, certainty, worry, and it comes in clear statements and deft understatement, and with wry, incisive humor. First, some lines that might take your breath away and give you a sense of Amichai's genius:

"An achievement, a retreat. Night reminds
And day forgets."
"From there the other roads began.
And my heart was covered with dreams, like
my shiny shoes that were covered with dust,

for dreams, too, are a long road
with an end I will not reach.”

This is a whole poem:

“God’s fate now
is like the fate
of trees and stones, sun and moon,
when people stopped believing in them
and began to believe in Him.

But He has to stay with us: at least like the trees, like the stones
and like the sun and the moon and the stars.”

Watch in the following how he uses the simple punctuation of a colon to great effect:

“My hands are stretched out to a past not mine
and to a future not mine: it is hard to love,
hard to embrace, with hands like that.”

“A woman said to me once:
‘Everyone goes to his own funeral.’ I didn’t understand then.
I don’t understand now, but
I go.”

“(And the howl of the orphans is passed from one generation
to the next, as in a relay race:
the baton never fails.)”

“And I do now what any memory dog does:
I howl quietly
and piss a boundary of remembrance around me
so no one can enter.”

“I went down to the harbor, thinking: I’m a lucky man—
I will never have to sail again.”

And in these lines the beauty of observation:

“And now it’s too soon for archaeology
and too late to fix what was done.”

“The landscape is calmed like a baby
through sobbing,

I recited the prayer of forgetting.”

“Searching for a goat or a son
has always been the beginning
of a new religion in these mountains.”

“And the land is divided into regions of memory and districts of hope, and its people are all
mixed together,
like those returning from a wedding and from a funeral.”

“Prophecy, too, is archaeology.”

“From a man who loses things
I’ve turned into a lost man.
I am tired of doors,
I want windows, only windows.”

“At night I walked again along the row of weeping willows
whose branches reach down. I sat on the same bench
where I waited many years ago, when I was a little boy.
Two generations of remembering have passed,
now the first generation of forgetting has come.”

I have three index cards filled on both sides with scribbled lines with page numbers and then there are just lines of page numbers where whole poems are denoted: “6, 7, 9, 12-13, 23, 24, 26, 29, 30, 58-59....” There are so many poems of excellence, profound and moving. This is a collection that resists shelving. You reach to put it up and open it and scan, then read, and then move from the bookcase and find a chair. And there you sit and read and wonder and are moved. Here is a poem whole, from a sequence called “Summer and the Far End of Prophecy,” that my eye fell on as I was intending to close the book:

Oh, the calendar’s blank prophecy on the first of the year.
Oh, the memory of beach chairs folded and stacked
in winter, shackled together with an iron chain
like galley slaves in ancient days. Slaves of memory.
Swimmers’ strokes preserve the memory of swimming
and of last summer too, of all the summers that were,
swimmers’ strokes proceed from love
and unto love they shall return. Oh, the great prophecy
of what is past or what is yet to come.
And there, at the far end of prophecy,
a swimsuit spread out to dry.

Tatyana says

"The three languages I know,
All the colors in which I see and dream:

None will help me."
- from "Like Our Bodies' Imprint"

"And like a dark branch that is white
where it is broken,
I too am bright in my love."
- from "Street"

"Sometimes pus,
sometimes poetry —
always something is excreted,
always pain."
- from "Ibn Gabirol"

"The two of them together and each of them alone."

Lynn says

I love Yehuda Amichai's works and treated myself to this collection after the NY Times had reviewed it so favorably. Definitely a great collection of his work, put together by Robert Alter. This book contains some of the poems that had not been previously translated into English and is a real gem!

Richard Anderson says

A great poet and communicator.

Sanjay Varma says

These poems represent the feelings and thoughts of an Israeli boy as he fought in the desert during the 60's and 70's. Some of the common themes include the obligation to his ancestors, the arbitrariness of fate, the beauty of women, and perceiving a kinship with the enemy. His most common technique is a simile, and many short poems are simply an extended simile. His second most common technique, which might be more accurately described as a flaw, is the tendency to dream about how many ancient civilizations have shared the Israeli land.

The translation quality is highly variable and mostly below average, they make his poems seem amateurish.

But a few of the poems really soar.

Moving into the 80's and later, the poems increasingly present religion as a salve against one's own pain, which replaces active engagement with reality. In its place the author substitutes a murmuring repetition of overloaded words, concepts, and symbols; standard sermons, or word puzzles composed of Hebrew words and names, Abraham, Yehuda, and such. They read like one man's self-medication by murmuring.

Howard Krosnick says

Like others whose reviews follow, having just finished reading this edition I find my heart and head and memories and understandings changed. Reading these poems Amichai has joined the short list of my favourite poets of all time. I have been so challenged, so delighted and saddened, so moved by the profound beauty of his poetry and only wish I were able to read it in the original Hebrew.

Michelle Olms says

Great book

Noreen says

Gorgeous poetry. Highly recommend.

Rachel says

See my review at <http://www.thereportergroup.org/Artic...>

Yvette says

The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai is vivid and bold, delicately tender, often ironic, sometimes forbidden, but always inspiring and original. This compilation is one of the most moving collections of poetry I have had the pleasure of reading.

Jory says

Gorgeous collection of most celebrated Israeli poet's work. So many in here I love -- especially where he questions his connections to Judaism, and religion in general. His set of poems on Jerusalem are stunning.
