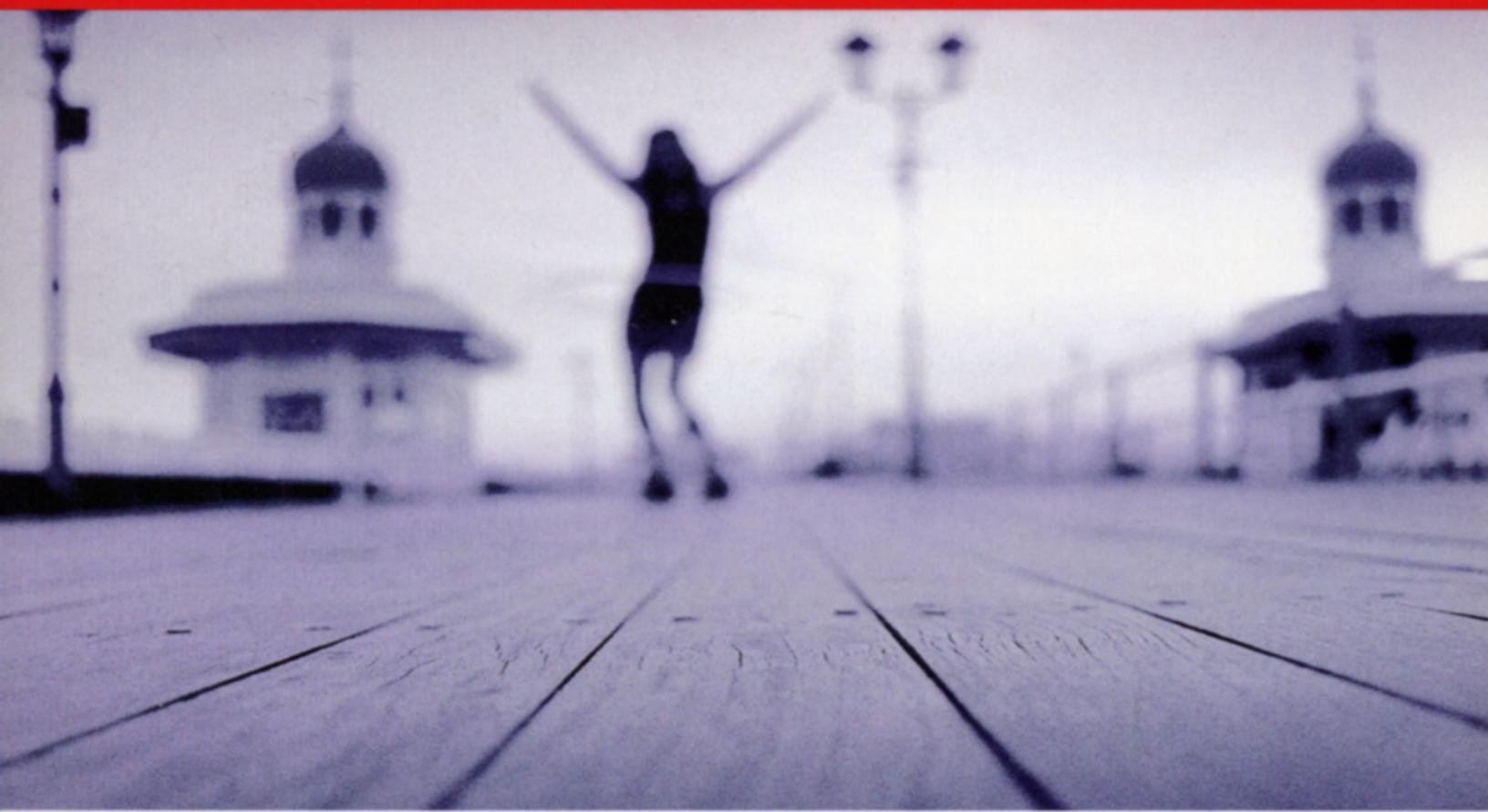


BBC
BOOKS

The
NATION'S
FAVOURITE



Twentieth Century
POEMS

EDITED BY GRIFF RHYS JONES

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THE NATION'S
FAVOURITE
TWENTIETH CENTURY
POEMS

— ◦ —

EDITED BY
GRIFF RHYS JONES

BBC
BOOKS

FOREWORD BY GRIFF RHYS JONES

— ◊ —

HERE IS ANOTHER selection of first-rate poetry: comic, moving, pertinent, witty, sharp, short and longish. Gathered together in this book is a comprehensive selection of the finest verse of the last hundred years. A host of different voices, which I hope will surprise and entertain in their variety and scope. Modern poetry is not the difficult and inaccessible stuff that popular imagination would have it. These poems really mean something to a lot of people.

Well, there we are. I can write with such breezy confidence because this selection is actually new and surprising to me as well, though not everybody seems to understand this. After the success of *The Nation's Favourite Poems*, for instance, a doctor from Persia sent me a poem of his own. There was a note with it: 'I hope you will agree with the many who have told me that this is the best poem ever written in the sonnet form and include it in your next anthology.'

Alas for the doctor, the retired coal miner, the former redcoat, and the many other aspiring poets who send me their work, the judgement as to whether they have written the best, or possibly the worst, poetry in the English language does not rest with me. The poems included in this volume, as in the other books in this series, were all voted for by 'the nation' in a television poll. While a significant proportion of the nation may have overlooked their duty in this respect, the number of people who do bother to vote is actually quite large. Large enough to pre-empt block claques and family conspiracies anyway.

The hundred or so poems promoted here are largely familiar works from acknowledged writers. Even the exciting sounding 'The Nightmare' by W.H. Auden turned out on closer enquiry to be the rather more familiar poem, 'Night Mail'. We have also had to re-include some favourites from that classic of the genre, *The Nation's Favourite Poems* (which was open to contenders from the entire span of human creativity).

Nonetheless, bizarrely, the nation's favourite poem of all time, Kipling's 'If—', is not the nation's favourite modern poem of the last hundred years. Perhaps some of the nation is unaware that it was written in 1912. (This may be the same section of the nation who voted for Wordsworth's 'The Daffodils' and Christina Rossetti's 'Remember'.) But then, everybody knows that 'modern poetry' is different from 'poetry'. It does not rhyme or scan and tends to deal with difficult subjects, except, er, here.

Philip Larkin identified the quality of a good poem as being the capturing of a specific emotional moment. Certainly choosing your absolute single favourite poem of the last hundred years is a demanding choice and it comes as no surprise that this selection tends towards the lyrical. Here are poems which people have stored away for later use, which encapsulate feeling rather than analysis. It is not that the experiments of modern poetry have been entirely ignored: there were votes for T.S. Eliot (in reflective mood) for example. But most of the great movements and significant advances seem to have failed to lodge in the heart. No Imagists, no Concrete, no Ezra Pound, no Thom Gunn. Favourite poems seem more likely to be emotional rather than intellectual. Those sometimes-despised sentimental Georgian poets will not lie down.

If, in some circles, the twentieth century is notable mainly for breaking ground and moulds and daring innovation, the nation itself seems wholly unconvinced. Most of the poetry here would be recognisable to Palgrave.

There were times, as the votes were counted, when this book threatened to be the *Collected Works of Sir John Betjeman*. He along with Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Dylan Thomas and Seamus Heaney jostle for top position as favourite modern poet.

W.H. Auden is well represented too, but in his less 'coded' work. (His film work, in fact. 'Night Mail' was the commentary for a documentary, and 'Stop all the clocks' became famous, of course, thanks to *Four Weddings and a Funeral*.) Our electorate seems to like a simple approach to a complex matter. I was once on a literary committee where several members vigorously attacked the distinguished Welsh poet R.S. Thomas for his 'clichés', by which they meant, possibly, the familiarity of his subjects and images: fields, farming, the burdens of life and so forth. But perhaps the poetry that people love and revere, ancient or modern, has always addressed itself to those familiar subjects rather better than any other literary form, and will always continue to do so.

Setting aside the appreciation of nature, there is an awful lot of loss here. Deaths of fathers figure strongly, and deaths of children and spouses too. And, of course, the contemplation of his or her own death is never far from the true poet's mind. Birth is also celebrated; though with a certain poetic foreboding, and usually with allusions to the infant's ultimate death.

For relief from births and deaths, you can turn to poems by Robert Graves, or Dylan Thomas. There are so many modern funny poets that it seems a pity there are not more here. Perhaps wry and detached irony does not a favourite make. Except in the case of the winning poem, of course. It was a shock to many, including, so I was told, the author, Jenny Joseph, that 'Warning' romped home ahead of the field. The producer had to go and look it up. (So did I, but it was the producer's job.) Some have said that the choice had something to do with the fact that the poem has been

prominently featured on a best-selling tea towel. I find books easier to take on a train, but I have read *The Oxford Book of Modern English Verse* and 'Warning is certainly there, chosen by Larkin himself.

So here is a first-rate selection of some of the greatest poetry of the last hundred years. And I say that, secure in the knowledge that I did not choose these poems, the nation did. (Aspiring poets, of whatever standard, please, please read that last bit again, very carefully. Thank you.)

But having said all that, I am going to break these rules and insert a special poem that nobody voted for. The BBC commissioned a modern version of the poem 'If—' to be read on television when the results of the poll were announced. It is called 'What If' and was written by Benjamin Zephaniah. Here it is, together with the original Rudyard Kipling poem that inspired its creation.

BENJAMIN ZEPHANIAH 1958-

WHAT IF

If you can keep your money when governments about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you.

If you can trust your neighbour when they trust not you
And they be very nosy too;

If you can await the warm delights of summer
Then summer comes and goes with sun not seen,
And pay so much for drinking water
Knowing that the water is unclean.

If you seek peace in times of war creation,
And you can see that oil merchants are to blame,

If you can meet a pimp or politician,
And treat those two impostors just the same;

If you cannot bear dis-united nations
And you think this new world order is a trick,
If you've ever tried to build good race relations,
And watch bad policing mess your work up quick.

If you can make one heap of all your savings
And risk buying a small house and a plot,
Then sit back and watch the economy inflating
Then have to deal with the negative equity you've got.

If you can force your mind and body to continue
When all the social services have gone,
If you struggle on when there is nothing in you,
Except the knowledge that justice cannot be wrong.

If you can speak the truth to common people
Or walk with Kings and Queens and live no lie,
If you can see how power can be evil
And know that every censor is a spy;

If you can fill an unforgiving lifetime
With years of working hard to make ends meet,
You may not be wealthy but I am sure you will find
That you can hold your head high as you walk the streets.

RUDYARD KIPLING 1865-1936

IF—

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream – and not make dreams your master;
If you can think – and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings – nor lose the common touch
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And - which is more - you'll be a Man, my son!

*'His look was a lion's,
Full of rage, defiance'*

from 'My Old Cat'

DYLAN THOMAS 1914-53

DO NOT GO GENTLE INTO THAT GOOD NIGHT

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Though wise men at their end know dark is right,
Because their words had forked no lightning they
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Good men, the last wave by, crying how bright
Their frail deeds might have danced in a green bay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

Wild men who caught and sang the sun in flight,
And learn, too late, they grieved it on its way,
Do not go gentle into that good night.

Grave men, near death, who see with blinding sight
Blind eyes could blaze like meteors and be gay,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

And you, my father, there on the sad height,
Curse, bless, me now with your fierce tears, I pray.
Do not go gentle into that good night.
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

JENNY JOSEPH 1932-

WARNING

When I am an old woman I shall wear purple
With a red hat which doesn't go, and doesn't suit me.
And I shall spend my pension on brandy and summer
gloves

And satin sandals, and say we've no money for butter.
I shall sit down on the pavement when I'm tired
And gobble up samples in shops and press alarm bells
And run my stick along the public railings
And make up for the sobriety of my youth.
I shall go out in my slippers in the rain
And pick the flowers in other people's gardens
And learn to spit.

You can wear terrible shirts and grow more fat
And eat three pounds of sausages at a go
Or only bread and pickle for a week
And hoard pens and pencils and beermats and things in
boxes.

But now we must have clothes that keep us dry
And pay our rent and not swear in the street
And set a good example for the children.
We must have friends to dinner and read the papers.

But maybe I ought to practise a little now?
So people who know me are not too shocked and
surprised
When suddenly I am old, and start to wear purple.

EDMUND BLUNDEN 1896-1974

THE MIDNIGHT SKATERS

The hop-poles stand in cones,
 The icy pond lurks under,
The pole-tops steeple to the thrones
 Of stars, sound gulfs of wonder;
But not the tallest there, 'tis said,
Could fathom to this pond's black bed.

Then is not death at watch
 Within those secret waters?
What wants he but to catch
 Earth's heedless sons and daughters?
With but a crystal parapet
Between, he has his engines set.

Then on, blood shouts, on, on,
 Twirl, wheel and whip above him,
Dance on this ball-floor thin and wan,
 Use him as though you love him;
Court him, elude him, reel and pass,
And let him hate you through the glass.

SYLVIA PLATH 1932-63

LADY LAZARUS

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.