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for all."** *Lawrence Ferlinghetti, poet & painter, and co-founder of City Lights Books*



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# Poetry

FOR

# DUMMIES®

**The Poetry Center**  
*at San Francisco State University*

**John Timpane, Ph.D.**

*Poet, journalist, and academic*

with **Maureen Watts**

**A Reference for the Rest of Us!™**

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A close-up photograph of a young man with short brown hair, smiling broadly as he reads a book. The book is held in front of him, and the pages are slightly blurred. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be a window with light coming through.

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***A Reference for the Rest of Us!***<sup>™</sup>

# ***Poetry For Dummies***<sup>®</sup>

**by The Poetry Center  
and John Timpane with  
Maureen Watts**



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# About the Authors

**The Poetry Center & American Poetry Archives at San Francisco State University** was founded in 1954 on the basis of a gift by W.H. Auden. The Poetry Center is one of the most long-lived, prestigious, and nationally renowned literary arts institutions in the United States. For almost 50 years, since Ruth Witt-Diamant, with esteemed poets Robert Duncan and Josephine Miles, initiated the Poetry Center's pioneering reading series, the Center has presented readings by poets, novelists, and other writers, in accord with the highest standards of literary excellence. The Poetry Center presents readings over two seasons annually, both on- and off-campus, open to the public.

The Poetry Center today operates under the aegis of San Francisco State University's Creative Writing Department, the largest in the country, and represents an irreplaceable collective record of the past half-century of American literary accomplishment. The Poetry Center's American Poetry Archives is a collection of over 2,000 original recordings of poets and writers reading from their work, recorded since the 1950s at Poetry Center readings. The collection includes rare readings by Allen Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Langston Hughes, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore, Alice Walker, Anne Sexton, Frank O'Hara, and many other great writers of the past 50 years.

**John Timpane** is the Commentary Page Editor of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. How'd he get there — and how'd he get from there to *Poetry For Dummies*? John was graduated from Stanford University with an M.A. and Ph.D. in English and the Humanities in 1980. He taught English in colleges and universities for 20 years; wrote books on composition and poetry; published articles on Shakespeare, Spenser, and other great writers; and, on the side, did a nifty little freelance writing gig (scientific writing, industrial film scripts, and journalism). John has written poetry since he was very small, works at the craft, and is very much involved in the poetry scene. He won the Academy of American Poets Prize at Stanford in 1980 and was a Fulbright Scholar in 1983–1984. Poetry, with its demand for clarity of vision, concentration of feeling in a small space, and richness of language, helps John be a better editor and writer at the *Inquirer*. He is the eldest of nine children and is married to Maria-Christina Keller, copy manager of *Scientific American* and a fine writer herself. They have a daughter, Pilar, and a son, Conor. John also musicks about, as a flutist in a jazz band and a bassist in a zydeco outfit. You can e-mail him at [jtimpane@aol.com](mailto:jtimpane@aol.com).

**Maureen Watts** started her career as a receptionist at a small publishing company in Berkeley, California, after graduating from the University of California at San Diego. From there, she fell into the exciting world of book publicity. The idea for *Poetry For Dummies* came to Maureen while she was driving over the San Francisco Bay Bridge on a bright day in March. A longtime poetry activist, she is on the board of directors of the National Poetry Association and past president of Small Press Traffic Literary Arts Center. She attributes her love of poetry to long afternoons spent playing in the fields of Illinois as a child. Watts adds literary agent and writer to

her job description as head of Watts Communications in San Francisco, California.

# Dedication

To our families and to everyone — from Enheduanna to the pair of eyes on these very words — who loves reading and writing poetry. Let *Poetry For Dummies* declare our lifelong thanks.

# Authors'

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# Introduction

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Suppose you invented a way to concentrate all the best things people ever thought and felt into a very few words. And suppose you *did* something to those words to make them pleasant, beautiful, unforgettable, and moving. Suppose this invention could get people to notice more of their own lives, sharpen their awareness, pay attention to things they'd never really considered before. Suppose it could make their lives — and them — better.

You'd really have something there.

Well, don't look now, but that invention has been around for at least 5,000 years — probably more. Millions of people love it and make it part of their lives. They turn to it when they need a smile, a lift, a moment of thoughtfulness. And millions of people write it, too.

What is this fantastic creation? Poetry. And it includes the work of Homer, Sappho, Kalidasa, Dante, Shakespeare, Ono no Komachi, Keats, Basho, Byron, Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Yeats, Plath, Ginsberg, Amiri Imamu Baraka, Adrienne Rich, Gerald Stern, Lucille Clifton, and many others. It's been a great five millennia, and we're starting the sixth in better shape than ever.

Poetry saw a tremendous surge in popularity at the end of the 20th century — from Magnetic Poetry mania to the

explosion of poetry slams across the country to an increased public appreciation of poets. And here in the 21st century, poetry continues to win more and more people over. And why not? It's great stuff.

We love poetry so much that we wrote this book. Most poets write poems for anyone willing to read and listen. But sometimes between the poet's notebook and the listening public a break occurs. Our hope and vision was to offer a book that gets past the things that sometimes divide poets and readers, things like technique, style, and school or genre, and the random distribution of books, poetry books, and journals.

Our goal in writing *Poetry For Dummies* was to bridge the literary gaps and throw open the doors of poetry — past, present, and future — to all. And, our hope is that if you say you “don't get” poetry or “don't like” poetry, this book just may change your mind.

Oh, and one promise: If you let poetry into your life — if you read aloud and read attentively, discover how to *interpret* poetry for yourself — you'll start seeing benefits, including a broader life, a more sensitive awareness, and a more flexible spirit.

If you are a poet or want to try your hand at poetry, welcome to an ancient and ever-changing craft with many traditions, rewards, and challenges.

# About This Book

*Poetry For Dummies* is for everyone. In these pages, we serve as your guides in the art of reading and interpreting poetry. We hope you will discover poets you haven't heard of or read before, revisit some old favorites, and pick up some pointers on poetry that will bring you a new understanding and enjoyment of the art.

Besides being a good introduction to the history of world poetry, *Poetry For Dummies* also offers a lot of practical information, too. Not sure of a literary term? Check our glossary in Appendix A. Looking for poetry on the Web? Our resource guide in Appendix C will point you in the direction of a few good places to start. Have a poem you've written that you want to get out into the world? Read Chapter 13 for information and tips on how to get out and read your poem to an audience or send it out for publication.

You can use this book's many writing exercises to brush up on your writing skills, add structure to your writing life, or help you break out of writer's block. Have a broken heart and want to write a traditional poem to bring your loved one back? Check out the section on writing sonnets and traditional forms (we offer no guarantees, of course).

When you start thinking about poetry, you will notice it's all around you. We give you tips on where to find poetry, where to find poetry readings and other events, and

which journals to pick up if you want to read the latest poetry being published.

These are just a few of the ways you can make use of this book. The rest, as they say, is up to you.

# How This Book Is Organized

This book does four things at once:

- ✓ It introduces you to reading and interpreting poetry.
- ✓ It introduces you to writing poetry.
- ✓ It tells you about poetry history, movements, and techniques.
- ✓ It guides you to good ways to find out more about poetry (organizations and magazines devoted to poets and poetry, as well as Web sites and places to attend readings).

This book *does* have a logical organization, and we invite you to use it. But by all means, be your own guide. Go straight to the parts you find most interesting. Flip through. See what looks good. If a poem beckons you, stop and read it. We'll wait.

A good beginning is Chapter 1, our all-purpose introduction to the art. We lay a special emphasis on reading aloud, a skill many people haven't exercised since they left grade school. We help you get your reading muscles in shape and ready for any poem that comes your way. And we close with a writing exercise for readers who can't wait to start writing their own poetry.

The following sections explain how the book is broken down and lets you know what you can expect to find in each part.

# Part I: Reading and Understanding Poetry

What *is* poetry, anyway? Where does it come from and why is it important? In this part, we define poetry and discuss where it stands at the beginning of the 21st century. Here you also find a short course on the essential skill of reading aloud (the best way to get to know poetry).

Reading poems is fine. But thinking about what they mean and how the poets *got* to that meaning is even better. So in Chapters 2 and 3, we look at how poems work. We survey the elements that make up poetry, beginning with the ways poets work with language, including the many varieties of metaphor, symbol, speaker, and situation. Then we move to subject and tone.

Chapter 4 talks about interpretation — the best way to get the most out of the poems you read. Becoming a good interpreter of poetry means paying attention to what *you* think, becoming more alert and sensitive, and being very aware of detail and implication.

Some of the greatest poetry in history comes to us from poets of long ago. But we are readers of now, and most of us need a few special skills to get the most out of poems from the past. Those skills are the heart and soul of Chapter 5.

## **Part II: In the Beginning Was a Poem**

In this part, you get to flip through the family photos, so to speak. We figured you would want a little background on the whole endeavor, so we load everybody on a bus and roar, tilting from side to side, through a quick tour of the 5,000 years of poetry. It has been an *eventful* 5,000 years, we can tell you that. And of all these poetic centuries, the 20th may have been most poetic of all. We look forward to an even more poetic 21st! Our tour of poetic history is global because poetry is global — so you'll read about the poetry of India, China, Japan, Africa, and South America and discover their greats and golden ages alongside Europe and the United States.

# **Part III: Writing Poetry: A Guide for Aspiring Poets**

Everyone is waiting for the next Shakespeare or Emily Dickinson to appear on the literary horizon. Here we show you a sampling of techniques and good approaches, as well as suggest some standards for you to shoot for. Want to submit your poems for publication? Enter the performance scene? You'll find some advice on these endeavors, too. The writing exercises collected here should bring out the poet in just about anyone. Warning: Writing poetry can be habit-forming.