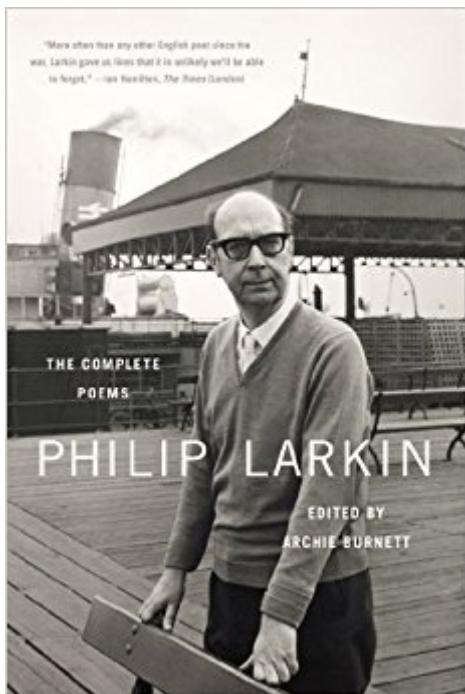


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The Complete Poems



Synopsis

The complete poems of the most admired British poet of his generation. This entirely new edition brings together all of Philip Larkin's poems. In addition to those that appear in *Collected Poems* (1988) and *Early Poems and Juvenilia* (2005), some unpublished pieces from Larkin's typescripts and workbooks are included, as well as verse—by turns scurrilous, satirical, affectionate, and sentimental—that had been tucked away in his letters. For the first time, Larkin's poems are given a comprehensive commentary. This draws critically upon, and substantially extends, the accumulated scholarship on Larkin, and covers closely relevant historical contexts, persons and places, allusions and echoes, and linguistic usage. Prominence is given to the poet's comments on his own work, which often outline the circumstances that gave rise to a poem or state that he was trying to achieve. Larkin often played down his literariness, but his poetry enrichingly alludes to and echoes the writings of many others. Archie Burnett's commentary establishes Larkin as a more complex and more literary poet than many readers have suspected.

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Customer Reviews

This collection has the poems which have previously been unavailable in addition to all of Larkin's published poems. The latter part of the volume has extensive notes on sources. The addition of the unpublished poems gives further insight into Larkin's famous preoccupation with death. He does not seem to be concerned with the act of dying, the process which gives pause to most of us. He is afraid of the existential state of nonbeing which death entails. Leaving death aside, many of the unpublished poems are very funny.

A beautifully published, well edited collection of Larkin's poetry. Arnie Burnett's editorial work has generated an exquisite volume, complete with incisive commentary on each poem, in addition to Larkin's original working notes. There are also a number of unpublished poems here, of varying quality. As to Larkin's corpus, it is quite clear that he continues to appear as one of Britain's major literary talents. Poems such as *High Windows* and *Here* have an enduring coldness and beauty, a beauty that refuses all sentiment. Larkin's disposition was, of course, strangely desolate, and hermetic. I can identify with his coldness, his collected reflections. I cannot always access his peculiar refusal to relate to others. His is a poetry that captures the failure of relating, as well as of belonging. His voice only penned a few poems, but they are among our greatest.

To my own surprise and embarrassment this was my first, real engagement with Larkin outside an anthologized poem or two like "Here." I've been told that Larkin's style and topical interest varies a bit in quality from work to work; but the poems in this collection are simply stellar and revelatory. I can't think of another poet I've read recently who demonstrates such incredibly precise control and sumptuous taste in his word nuances. Perhaps Galway Kinnell maybe. But there are asterisks and exclamation marks and "wows" written all over the margins of this book. By way of example (and keep in mind, these are just isolated lines): Larkin renames a baby, "tightly folded bud," Spring is "fold of untaught flower, is race of water,/Is earth's most multiple, excited daughter," the past is "a valley cropped by fat neglected chances/that we insensately forbore to fleece," and skin as "Obedient daily dress." Needless to say, these lines begin, form the body of, and end exquisite poems. I can't wait to continue exploring more Larkin. There is a surprise at every linguistic turn.

I've always been ambivalent about Philip Larkin's place as Britain's greatest post-war poet, but this collection adds to the poems an extensive commentary which helps explain Larkin's pessimism and gloomy outlook. The poems of course stand alone, but the commentary helps in understanding Larkin as someone not entirely mired in discontent, who is reacting in a visceral and personal way to the more troubling circumstances of his life. There are some truly great poems here, and lovely, spare descriptive passages. To my mind, some of his best work remained unpublished in his lifetime and these poems can lead to a new appreciation of his work. Just don't read the book to cheer yourself up.

This complete collection of Larkin's Poetry served to remind, at least me, of the beauty of "unbullied"

language, and how truly great of a poet Philip Larkin was. The book's commentary is a great way for lovers of Larkin to understand how Larkin composed his poems and, in some cases, how long it took him to be satisfied that a poem was complete (I think of "The Whitsun Weddings" which took, all told, almost three years to write [if you begin at the date of the occurrence]). The only think I would like to have seen would have been a Table of Contents that listed all the poems and their respective pages rather than simply each book, his unpublished, and his incomplete poems; but the organization of the book is not so bad as to warrant removing a star.

That Larkin is Britain's favourite poet is down to his spare, stripped down, conversational style, combined with a dyspeptic view of life which seems congenial to the British in a way Americans can't always share: Man hands on misery to man. It deepens like a coastal shelf. Get out as early as you can, And don't have any kids yourself. That is taken from "This Be The Verse", an oddly titled lyric poem in three verses of four iambic tetrameters on an alternating rhyme scheme, with its even more famous opening line (which I won't quote here because it contains an expletive). This is a fine volume of Larkin's poems, full of scholarly annotations, essential reading for anybody wanting to mug up on this titan of 20th century poetry. His obsession with death and the futility he saw in life may be dark and depressing, but the vitality in it shines through. Larkin is an unmissable poet, plumbing the very depths of despair.

Many readers in America don't know Philip Larkin's poetry at all, which is too bad. He was, arguably, England's greatest poet of the last half of the twentieth century. Everything is here. An important addition to any modern poetry collection.

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