



# Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present

*David Lehman (Editor)*

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A prose poem is a poem written in prose rather than verse. But what does that really mean? Is it an indefinable hybrid? An anomaly in the history of poetry? Are the very words "prose poem" an oxymoron? This groundbreaking anthology edited by celebrated poet David Lehman, editor of *The Best American Poetry* series, traces the form in all its dazzling variety from Poe and Emerson to Auden and Ashbery and on, right up to the present. In his brilliant and lucid introduction, Lehman defines the prose poem, summarizes its French heritage, and outlines its history in the United States. Included here are important works from masters of American literature, as well as poems by contemporary mainstays and emerging talents who demonstrate why the form has become an irresistible option for the practicing poet today. *Great American Prose Poems* is a marvelous collection, a must-have for anyone interested in the current state of the art.

## Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present Details

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Author : David Lehman (Editor)

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## From Reader Review Great American Prose Poems: From Poe to the Present for online ebook

### Katrine Solvaag says

Obviously different poems will appeal to different readers and not everything was to my taste, but considering the high amount of post it notes currently scattered throughout the collection I'd say my experience of reading it was definitely positive!

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### Tristan says

Actual rating: 3.75

This was a solid collection, but definitely not the best I've ever read.

As the title suggests, all of these pieces are prose poems. A prose poem is, in its most basic definition, a poem that is in prose, meaning it has no lines or stanzas, but rather is all about sentences and paragraphs. Lehman explores all this in his informative, if rather pretentious, introduction, which does do a nice job of exploring how the prose poem became an established form. Unfortunately, because the writing of a poem in prose rather than in verse is a break from standard practice, the prose poem has an inherently "subversive" element. Many selections in this anthology seem to have been chosen for how well they play up this "subversive" quality, not for any real poetic merit. This (for me at least) showed up in works like "Calling Jesus", "Five Fondly Remembered Passages from My Childhood Reading", "Why I Hate the Prose Poem" (which was one of my absolute least favorite poems), and "Hot Ass Poem". These works often fell down on the musicality and power that I expect of any good poems, regardless of form. My first criterion for a good prose poem is that I would have to appreciate the same words if they were in a verse poem, and a number of pieces did not meet that requirement. Some of the "true" formal experiments were also unsuccessful. The poem "Chekhov: A Sestina" was actually rather good, but the "prose sestina" was not a form that I felt worked well. A sestina is a verse form where all lines end with one of six words, repeated in a prescribed order. How does a poem without lines mimic this? By making each sentence end with one of the "sestina words" as if it were a line. While this sounds good in theory, it gives too much emphasis to the end-words and ends up somewhat choppy and forced, just as a regular sestina would if all lines were end-stopped. On the other hand, the book was also full of wonderful poems by a wide variety of authors. Some, like Agha Shahid Ali, Allen Ginsberg, and John Ashberry, I have had at least read one or more of their poems. Others, such as Ira Sadoff, Yusef Komunyakaa, and Richard Blanco, I had never encountered and am now excited to look for more of their work in other anthologies. I really liked many pieces, but among my favorites are Margaret Atwood's "In Love with Raymond Chandler", Maureen Seaton's "Toy Car" and "Lateral Time", John Yau's "Predella", Anselm Berrigan's "The Page Torn Out" (another one that experiments with form; it is structured as a play), and Elizabeth Bishop's "12 O'Clock News". The presence of these and other truly great poems saved the collection from its weaker offerings and made the book a worthwhile look at a poetic form.

The collection is organized chronologically by author's birth date, and then by publication date when one author has multiple poems. This makes the anthology a scattered history as, particularly later on, the publications of poems do not reflect their place in the book and it can be hard to find a particular author, but it worked as well as just about any other system could. While probably best for those with a vested and/or scholarly interest in poetry and this form, it did make for an enjoyable read.

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## Rebecca says

I've finally discovered that I read anthologies the same way most people read bibliographies and magazines. (I'm making my peace with my inability to get through and entire Us Weekly. Though I guess it would have been helpful if this book had a few poems about recent plastic celebrity surgery and whether Camilla will be going to Di's memorial service.) That's why it only gets three stars.

Just kidding. I liked it. You should read it, you pornographic lovers of literature.

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## E says

To continue a Harryette Mullen metaphor, this book is the sort of book I read when I want to make-out with the English language. It reminds me why I love to write and read great writing. It reminds me why prose is my favorite when it is poetry. It reminds me why I love representing the abstract with the concrete. A bowl of dead bees, a bear pushing a woman in a wheelbarrow, pushing another woman over a cliff - it's all here. Few compilations contain such a great selection and few books leave me looking back up at the world and savoring a richness that could even inspire a horse.

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## Jen says

This is a wonderful collection! I'm teaching prose poetry as part of a one-day poetry class, and while looking around online I came across this gem - over 300 pages of prose poems. I found most online while searching for further information, but I wouldn't have been able to without leads from this anthology. I especially loved seeing Robert Hass's "A Story About the Body," which led me to "Museum," which isn't included here (look them up - good stuff!). I was also happy to be reminded of Eliot's "Hysteria," which I hadn't thought to use. I miss Baudelaire, but these are all American (meaning, US) poets and I can't complain. Great find.

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## True Reader says

Another prose poetry book. Now you may be asking, "Why, Alex? Why are you reading so much prose poetry?" Alas, I have not discovered a hitherto uncomprehended medium of writing to which I have fallen in love. No. Instead it has been thrust upon me like swiss chard when I was eight years-old. When I say forced, it is only because I've been reading it for school, which I like, which I love, which is a good thing as I spend most my hours of each day thinking and participating in it. However, prose poetry is certainly something I could do without. I'm not much for poetry to begin with, so throw in the avant-garde and it just makes it less enjoyable, in my opinion.

That being said, Great American Prose Poems is, doubtless, an interesting read if you enjoy poetry to begin with. I do not. The sheer scope of writers, from Poe, William Carlos Williams, e. e. cummings, the list goes on and never seems to disappoint in terms of writerly powerhouses. But for me this is not enough. A prose poetry is intent of making me feel a certain way, if anyway at all. The meaning of what is in the words is secondary. But I like meaning very much. I like character and human interaction what why people do the things that do. If there is a reason for which I am feeling, it gives me something to hang my hat on... or warp

my mind around, I should say. The meaning I'm looking for is the reason for the emotions, if there is no reason, what is real about the pieces? Yes some words can be put down on a page, and any combination of concrete nouns and verbs will provoke emotion. But to make me passionate about said words there must be some structure.

This is not to say that there is no structure in this collection of prose poetry. There certainly is in some pieces. Not so much in others. Suffice it to say it is a book, a collection of many colors. It will appeal to those who enjoy poetry, and those who enjoy experimental poetry for sure.

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### **Elancharan Gunasekaran says**

A must read!

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### **Hardie Brian says**

American Prose Poetry is poopy. Mostly.... charles simic, bernstien, stevens, edson.... there are some great amaerican prose poets, but there needs to elbow grease put into what the standard for what is being considered acceptable, shall we go back to the surrealists, dadaists, rene char...? we need a raising of the bar. musical language, seeing a page more as a blank canvas or blank sheet music

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### **Ted Burke says**

There is much cross over between prose and poetry forms in contemporary literature, which one can read about in David Lehman's excellent anthology The Great American Prose Form. What he essentially declares in his comprehensive introduction is that we need to rid ourselves of the idea that postmodernism was the advent of writers blurring genre boundries and realize that writers, poets and prose writers both, have been mashing together the forms for quite awhile; our strict ideas of what "poetry" is should be loosened because the way the better (and lesser poets) of the day compose their verse won't obey someone's global dictums.

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### **Erika Ostergaard says**

Like all comprehensive surveys of a century and a half of lit, it hits half the time, misses the other.

Really, it's like the in-print version of a wikipedia page: full of things to point you in a direction you'd rather be going in.

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### **Tom says**

Prose poems? Lyrical essays? Short-short stories? What I love about this genre is that it defies easy categorization and lends itself to some of those innovative writing you're likely to come across.

The Irish poet Conor O'Callaghan once said that the prose poem was an "American genre." He added that he meant that as a compliment. Though I'm not sure I agree completely with that statement (Baudelaire wrote plenty of prose poems, which, frankly, I think are better than his famous *Les Fleurs du Mal*"), there does seem to be something distinctly American in the rowdy range of this mischievous cousin to more traditional poetry. Anything goes in a prose poem, and therefore often leads to more surprises than you find in other forms of poetry.

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### **Laurel L. Perez says**

Even if you are not a "poetry person" (whatever that means), this is a lovely little collection of prose poems that will make you laugh, confuse, confound, and haunt. Though there are some pieces in here that may seem as if editor Lehman simply found a prose poem here & there, and made a collection of many well know writers, it was a treat to explore.

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### **Paul says**

Really loved this. I read this the way I think anthologies are meant to be read, which is as a sort of introduction, or like a smorgasbord, to see what you like and spit out what you don't. What I got from this was a bunch of poets to check out, which, I'm excited. So. Would most definitely recommend this to anyone in my position. Which is what, you're wondering? Bite me.

I was really glad the purported prose-poem tendency to approach the absurd or the surreal wasn't really present here. I'm not really "into surrealism," okay. One weird exception is several of these poems featured families who happened to be animal families, or women mating with cheetahs, or stuff like that.

I will say this, the introduction was *great*. It really was. Money's worth right there.

And James Tate? Come on.

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### **Bojan Tunguz says**

I've always enjoyed reading short stories, but over the years I've started to appreciate their form more than their plot-lines, and a careful and insightful use of language became something I increasingly valued. The first time I came across a prose poem, although I did not know it was called that at the time, was a translation of Czeslaw Milosz poem by Robert Pinsky. I was immediately fascinated by it, but I thought it was just something characteristic Milosz's style. Many years later I came across this book, and I was instantly drawn to it. I've read it and re-read it many times. It contains some of the best prose poems out there, and it helped me discover some new poets that I would have otherwise not known about. Based on that, I am adding new books to my Amazon wish list on a continuing basis. It's definitely worth buying and reading.

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### **Cherie says**

A- Some of the entries are fantastic, and others are mediocre. But def worth reading!

