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Middle Earth: Poems

By Henri Cole



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The fullest culmination to date of an original voice and “a central poet of his generation” (Harold Bloom)

*Time was plunging forward,
like dolphins scissoring open water or like me,
following Jenny's flippers down to see the coral reef,
where the color of sand, sea and sky merged,
and it was as if that was all God wanted:
not a wife, a house or a position,
but a self, like a needle, pushing in a vein.
—from “Olympia”*

In his fifth collection of verse, Henri Cole's melodious lines are written in an open style that is both erotic and visionary. Few poets so thrillingly portray the physical world, or man's creaturely self, or the cycling strain of desire and self-reproach. Few poets so movingly evoke the human quest of “a man alone,” trying “to say something true that has body, / because it is proof of his existence.” *Middle Earth* is a revelatory collection, the finest work yet from an author of poems that are “marvels—unbuttoned, riveting, dramatic—burned into being” (Tina Barr, *Boston Review*).



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Middle Earth: Poems By Henri Cole Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Making good on his biography's pointed reference to his Japanese birthplace, Cole spent 2001-2 living in Kyoto on a fellowship from the US-Japan Friendship Commission, an experience that tinges this careful book of formal verse with neo-Orientalism. The patterns and tensions of desire and love are figured here as a series of intimate encounters with animals—a koi "defining itself, like a large white/ flower, by separation from me"—and with a feminine other embodied in Japanese cultural reference: "I tied a paper mask onto my face/ my lips almost inside its small red mouth." Cole, whose last book was 1998's acclaimed *The Visible Man*, follows circuitous mythic paths into barely remembered childhood years spent in Japan, in search of an Ur-moment that will explain or mitigate the death of the poet's father. In poems like "Olympia," "Medusa" and "Self-Portrait as the Red Princess," restrained lines build tightly to unforeseen lyric bursts, in which desire, guilt, and longing bind child and adult, or "open[] the soft meat of our throats." But too often here that feverish, ecstatic moment is deadened by a discursive comment on how to read a poem or why to write one, as in the prefatory remark where self-portrait as body—"almost naked in the heat/ trying to support a little universe/ of blackening pinks"—slides into a glib mission statement: "as a man alone fills a void with words,/ not to be consoling or point to what is good,/ but to say something true that has body,/ because it is proof of his existence." Yet this fifth collection, taking Cole from Knopf to FSG, should reach both established fans and new readers.

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From [Booklist](#)

This is a book about loneliness and consolation. Cole now sees a "young gray head in the mirror," and the poems of his fifth collection report the familiar circumstances of midlife. The decrepitude and death of parents predominate in the book's first section, solitary exchanges with himself and the nonhuman world occur in the second, and personal rituals of self-renewal preoccupy the third. Cole is homosexual, and to ignore the fact while perusing the book is to risk missing the special poignancy of "Black Camellia [After Petrarch]," with its admission of using solitary pleasures (gardening, cooking, drinking tea) to "flee from my secret love / and from my mind's worm." As he repeatedly admits, implicitly and forthrightly, however, Cole wants "love / to trample through my arms again," though even when he is engaged in his restorative rituals, as "At the Grave of Elizabeth Bishop," he is tempted to merge with the world, "detaching from the human I, Henri." In the collection closer, "Blur," he seems about to encounter love again, but he discovers, "I don't have the time to invest in what / I purport to desire." This poet speaks for a preponderance, perhaps, of his American generation, delicately but with unflinching honesty. *Ray Olson*

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Review

"*Middle Earth* is Henri Cole's epiphany, his Whitmanesque sunrise. The modulation of these poems is extraordinary: they have a continuous undersong. 'It must give pleasure,' Wallace Stevens said. So oxymoronic is pleasure-pain, in Henri Cole, that we need to modify Stevens. But for now, poems like 'Icarus Breathing,' 'Original Face,' and 'Olympia' are the poems of our climate. Henri Cole has become a master poet, with few peers . . . A central poet of his generation." *Harold Bloom*

"These are the poems of a conjurer, ceremonial and hypnotic . . . This collection marks the birth of Cole, a writer in his late 40s, as a poet for a wider audience. He displays his sense of humor and takes an unguilty pleasure in his visions." *Dana Goodyear, Los Angeles Times*

“Cole is fated to be a deeply stylish poet, whatever technical tools he picks up or sets down . . . Readers will find in Cole's latest book, *Middle Earth*, a lyric reconsecration.” ?Maureen N. McLane, *The New York Times Book Review*

“In his fifth collection, Cole, who has won an award from the National Endowment for the Arts, examines the dichotomies between life and death, animal and human, and the lover and the beloved. Many of the poems, including 'My Tea Ceremony' and 'Self-Portrait at the Red Princess,' show a marked Japanese influence; others record a grown son's grief over the death of his father. In 'Radiant Ivory,' the poet attempts to catalog that loss: 'I locked / myself in my room, bored and animal-like. / The travel clock, the Johnnie Walker bottle, / the parrot tulips-everything possessed his face.' Cole also reminisces about his childhood with his father. In 'Powdered Milk,' he captures a garden memory where 'big ordinary goldfish / chewed through the pond; / and the speech of bees encircled us, / filling a void' . . . Cole writes with clarity and an emotive resonance. These poems succeed as the best poems do: they transport the reader to other worlds, no less beautiful or complicated than our own. Highly recommended.” ?*Library Journal*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Arlene Oliver:

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Hazel Freese:

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