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# An Introduction to English Poetry

By James Fenton



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**A wise, absorbing, and surprising introduction to poetry written in English, from one of England's leading poets**

James Fenton is that rare scholar "not ashamed to admit that he mostly reads for pleasure" (Charles Simic, *The New York Review of Books*). In this eminently readable guide to his abiding passion, he has distilled the essence of a library's--and a lifetime's--worth of delight.

The pleasures of his own verse can be found in abundance here: economy, a natural ease, and most of all, surprise. What is English poetry? Fenton argues that it includes any recited words in English that marshal rhythm for their meaning--among them prisoners's work songs, Broadway show tunes, and the cries of street vendors captured in verse. From these beginnings, Fenton describes the rudiments of--and, most important, the inspiration for--the musical verse we find in books, and concludes with an illuminating discussion of operas and songs. Fenton illustrates his comments with verse from all over the English-speaking world.

Catholic in his taste, shrewd in his distinctions, and charmingly frank, Fenton is an ideal guide to everything to do with poetry, from the temperament of poets to their accomplishment, in all its variety. In all his writing, prose or verse, Fenton has always had the virtue of saying, in a way that seems effortless, precisely what lies at the heart of the matter. In this vein, *An Introduction to English Poetry* is one of his highest accomplishments.



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Fenton is primarily concerned with the whys of English verse. Why is iambic pentameter the standard line in English? Why do modern poets recite as they do (flatly)? Why are some poetic forms more versatile in English than others? Why has poetic drama in English been moribund since the seventeenth century? If he doesn't have definitive or original answers to such questions, he always speaks authoritatively about them as a poet and broad-ranging student of poetry. He knows and practices what he talks about. He gets history into the discussion by discriminating between what can and can't now be read comprehensibly--that is, between later-than-fifteenth-century verse and earlier poetry, even Chaucer's, which is pronounced very differently--and in the chronological range, from Elizabethan lyrics to a contemporary experimental sonnet, of the poems he quotes to exemplify different forms, meters, and rhythmic variations within the verse line. John Hollander's *Rhyme's Reason* (3d ed., 2001) remains the best primer on poetic forms per se, but to understand form in English verse, Fenton's your man. *Ray Olson*

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## Review

"[Fenton's] essays educate, enlighten, surprise and thrill, unfailingly." ?Robin Lippincott, *The New York Times Book Review*

## About the Author

**James Fenton** was Professor of Poetry at Oxford from 1994 to 1999. His most recent works on gardening, *A Garden from a Hundred Packets of Seed* (FSG, 2002), of criticism, *The Strength of Poetry*, and of poetry, *Out of Danger*, are published by FSG.

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