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The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong

By David Orr



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A cultural “biography” of Robert Frost’s beloved poem, arguably the most popular piece of literature written by an American

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood . . .” One hundred years after its first publication in August 1915, Robert Frost’s poem “The Road Not Taken” is so ubiquitous that it’s easy to forget that it is, in fact, a poem. Yet poetry it is, and Frost’s immortal lines remain unbelievably popular. And yet in spite of this devotion, almost everyone gets the poem hopelessly wrong.

David Orr’s *The Road Not Taken* dives directly into the controversy, illuminating the poem’s enduring greatness while revealing its mystifying contradictions. Widely admired as the poetry columnist for *The New York Times Book Review*, Orr is the perfect guide for lay readers and experts alike. Orr offers a lively look at the poem’s cultural influence, its artistic complexity, and its historical journey from the margins of the First World War all the way to its canonical place today as a true masterpiece of American literature.

“The Road Not Taken” seems straightforward: a nameless traveler is faced with a choice: two paths forward, with only one to walk. And everyone remembers the traveler taking “the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference.” But for a century readers and critics have fought bitterly over what the poem really says. Is it a paean to triumphant self-assertion, where an individual boldly chooses to live outside conformity? Or a biting commentary on human self-deception, where a person chooses between identical roads and yet later romanticizes the decision as life altering?

What Orr artfully reveals is that the poem speaks to *both* of these impulses, and all the possibilities that lie between them. The poem gives us a portrait of choice without making a decision itself. And in this, “The Road Not Taken” is distinctively American, for the United States is the country of choice in all its ambiguous splendor.

Published for the poem’s centennial—along with a new Penguin Classics Deluxe Edition of Frost’s poems, edited and introduced by Orr himself—*The Road Not*

Taken is a treasure for all readers, a triumph of artistic exploration and cultural investigation that sings with its own unforgettably poetic voice.

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- Sales Rank: #622028 in Books
- Published on: 2015-08-18

- Released on: 2015-08-18
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.56" h x .71" w x 5.75" l, 1.00 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 192 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Publishers Weekly:

"Orr blends theory, biography, psychology, science, and a healthy dose of pop culture into a frothy mix so fun, readers may forget they're learning something."

Kirkus Reviews:

"Orr presents a fresh, perceptive reading of the verse; places it in the context of Frost's life, other works, and public persona; and considers the meaning of choice in American culture. An illuminating voyage into the heart of Frost's poem and the American spirit."

Library Journal:

"This entertaining book will appeal to poetry and American literature lovers, as well as to readers interested in the interweaving of art and culture."

New York Times Book Review

"David Orr has written the best popular explanation to date of the most popular poem in American history."

Wall Street Journal

"[David Orr's] achievement in this shrewd and patient book lies in connecting Frost's deceptively folksy manner with the very things that make him matter."

Christian Science Monitor

"Orr is fascinated by why so many have read this poem so positively for so long, and what this fact reveals about the American soul."

The Boston Globe

"The most satisfying part of Orr's fresh appraisal of 'The Road Not Taken' is the reappraisal it can inspire in longtime Frost readers whose readings have frozen solid. The crossroads between the poet and the man is where Frost leaves his poems for us to discover, turning what seems like a fork in the road into a site of limitless potential, 'in which all decisions are equally likely.'"

About the Author

David Orr is the poetry columnist for *The New York Times Book Review*. He is the winner of the Nona Balakian Prize from the National Book Critics Circle, and his writing has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *Slate*, and *The Yale Review*. He holds a BA from Princeton and a JD from Yale Law School, and is a visiting professor at Cornell University.

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Introduction

A young man hiking through a forest is abruptly confronted with a fork in the path. He pauses, his hands in his pockets, and looks back and forth between his options. As he hesitates, images from possible futures

flicker past: the young man wading into the ocean, hitchhiking, riding a bus, kissing a beautiful woman, working, laughing, eating, running, weeping. The series resolves at last into a view of a different young man, with his thumb out on the side of a road. As a car slows to pick him up, we realize the driver is the original man from the crossroads, only now he's accompanied by a lovely woman and a child. The man smiles slightly, as if confident in the life he's chosen and happy to lend that confidence to a fellow traveler. As the car pulls away and the screen is lit with gold—for it's a commercial we've been watching—the emblem of the Ford Motor Company briefly appears.

The advertisement I've just described ran in New Zealand in 2008. And it is, in most respects, a normal piece of smartly assembled and quietly manipulative product promotion. But there is one very unusual aspect to this commercial. Here is what is read by a voice-over artist, in the distinctive vowels of New Zealand, as the young man ponders his choice:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could

To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,

And having perhaps the better claim,

Because it was grassy and wanted wear;

Though as for that the passing there

Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay

In leaves no step had trodden black.

Oh, I kept the first for another day!

Yet knowing how way leads on to way,

I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh

Somewhere ages and ages hence:

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

It is, of course, “The Road Not Taken” by Robert Frost. In the commercial, this fact is never announced; the audience is expected to recognize the poem unaided. For any mass audience to recognize any poem is (to put it mildly) unusual. For an audience of car buyers in New Zealand to recognize a hundred-year-old poem from a country eight thousand miles away is something else entirely.

But this isn’t just any poem. It’s “The Road Not Taken,” and it plays a unique role not simply in American literature, but in American culture—and in world culture as well. Its signature phrases have become so ubiquitous, so much a part of everything from coffee mugs to refrigerator magnets to graduation speeches, that it’s almost possible to forget the poem is actually a poem. In addition to the Ford commercial, “The Road Not Taken” has been used in advertisements for Mentos, Nicorette, the multibillion-dollar insurance company AIG, and the job-search website Monster.com, which deployed the poem during Super Bowl XXXIV to great success. Its lines have been borrowed by musical performers including (among many others) Bruce Hornsby, Melissa Etheridge, George Strait, and Talib Kweli, and it’s provided episode titles for more than a dozen television series, including *Taxi*, *The Twilight Zone*, and *Battlestar Galactica*, as well as lending its name to at least one video game, Spry Fox’s *Road Not Taken* (“a roguelike puzzle game about surviving life’s surprises”). As one might expect, the influence of “The Road Not Taken” is even greater on journalists and authors. Over the past thirty-five years alone, language from Frost’s poem has appeared in nearly two thousand news stories worldwide, which yields a rate of more than once a week. In addition, “The Road Not Taken” appears as a title, subtitle, or chapter heading in more than four hundred books by authors other than Robert Frost, on subjects ranging from political theory to the impending zombie apocalypse. At least one of these was a massive international bestseller: M. Scott Peck’s self-help book *The Road Less Traveled: A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth*, which was originally published in 1978 and has sold more than seven million copies in the United States and Canada.

Given the pervasiveness of Frost’s lines, it should come as no surprise that the popularity of “The Road Not Taken” appears to exceed that of every other major twentieth-century American poem, including those often considered more central to the modern (and modernist) era. Admittedly, the popularity of poetry is difficult to judge. Poems that are attractive to educators may not be popular with readers, so the appearance of a given poem in anthologies and on syllabi doesn’t necessarily reveal much. And book sales indicate more about the popularity of a particular poet than of any individual poem. But there are at least two reasons to think that “The Road Not Taken” is the most widely read and recalled American poem of the past century (and perhaps the adjective “American” could be discarded). The first is the Favorite Poem Project, which was devised by former poet laureate Robert Pinsky. Pinsky used his public role to ask Americans to submit their favorite poem in various forms; the clear favorite among more than eighteen thousand entries was “The Road Not Taken.”

The second, more persuasive reason comes from Google. Until it was discontinued in late 2012, a tool called Google Insights for Search allowed anyone to see how frequently certain expressions were being searched by users worldwide over time and to compare expressions to one another. Google normalized the data to account for regional differences in population, converted it to a scale of 1 to 100, and displayed the results so that the relative differences in search volume would be obvious. Here is the result that Google provided when “The Road Not Taken” and “Frost” were compared with several of the best-known modern poems and their authors, all of which are often taught alongside Frost’s work in college courses on American poetry of the first half of the twentieth century:

According to Google, then, “The Road Not Taken” was, as of mid-2012, at least four times as searched as the central text of the modernist era—*The Waste Land*—and at least twenty-four times as searched as the most anthologized poem by Ezra Pound. By comparison, this is even greater than the margin by which the term “college football” beats “archery” and “water polo.” Given Frost’s typically prickly relationships with almost all of his peers (he once described Ezra Pound as trying to become original by “imitating somebody

that hasn't been imitated recently"), one can only imagine the pleasure this news would have brought him.

But as everyone knows, poetry itself isn't especially widely read, so perhaps being the most popular poem is like being the most widely requested salad at a steak house. How did "The Road Not Taken" fare against slightly tougher competition? Better than you might think:

The results here are even more impressive when you consider that "The Road Not Taken" is routinely misidentified as "The Road Less Traveled," thereby reducing the search volume under the poem's actual title. (For instance, a search for "frost's poem the road less traveled" produces more than two hundred thousand results, none of which would have been counted above.) Frost once claimed his goal as a poet was "to lodge a few poems where they will be hard to get rid of"; with "The Road Not Taken," he appears to have lodged his lines in granite. On a word-for-word basis, it may be the most popular piece of literature ever written by an American.

AND ALMOST EVERYONE gets it wrong. This is the most remarkable thing about "The Road Not Taken"—not its immense popularity (which is remarkable enough), but the fact that it is popular for what seem to be the wrong reasons. It's worth pausing here to underscore a truth so obvious that it is often taken for granted: Most widely celebrated artistic projects are known for being essentially what they purport to be. When we play "White Christmas" in December, we correctly assume that it's a song about memory and longing centered around the image of snow falling at Christmas. When we read Joyce's *Ulysses*, we correctly assume that it's a complex story about a journey around Dublin as filtered through many voices and styles. A cultural offering may be simple or complex, cooked or raw, but its audience nearly always knows what kind of dish is being served.

Frost's poem turns this expectation on its head. Most readers consider "The Road Not Taken" to be a paean to triumphant self-assertion ("I took the one less traveled by"), but the literal meaning of the poem's own lines seems completely at odds with this interpretation. The poem's speaker tells us he "shall be telling," at some point in the future, of how he took the road less traveled by, yet he has already admitted that the two paths "equally lay / In leaves" and "the passing there / Had worn them really about the same." So the road he will later call less traveled is actually the road *equally* traveled. The two roads are interchangeable.

According to this reading, then, the speaker will be claiming "ages and ages hence" that his decision made "all the difference" only because this is the kind of claim we make when we want to comfort or blame ourselves by assuming that our current position is the product of our own choices (as opposed to what was chosen for us, or allotted to us by chance). The poem isn't a salute to can-do individualism; it's a commentary on the self-deception we practice when constructing the story of our own lives. "The Road Not Taken" may be, as the critic Frank Lentricchia memorably put it, "the best example in all of American poetry of a wolf in sheep's clothing." But we could go further: It may be the best example in all of American *culture* of a wolf in sheep's clothing.

In this it strongly resembles its creator. Frost is the only major literary figure in American history with two distinct audiences, one of which regularly assumes that the other has been deceived. The first audience is relatively small and consists of poetry devotees, most of whom inhabit the art form's academic subculture. For these readers, Frost is a mainstay of syllabi and seminars, and a regular subject of scholarly articles (though he falls well short of inspiring the interest that Ezra Pound and Wallace Stevens enjoy). He's considered bleak, dark, complex, and manipulative; a genuine poet's poet, not a historical artifact like Longfellow or a folk balladeer like Carl Sandburg. While Frost isn't the most esteemed of the early-twentieth-century poets, very few dedicated poetry readers talk about him as if he wrote greeting card verse.

Then there is the other audience. This is the great mass of readers at all age levels who can conjure a few lines of “The Road Not Taken” and “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening,” and possibly “Mending Wall” or “Birches,” and who think of Frost as quintessentially American in the way that amber waves of grain are quintessentially American. To these readers (or so the first audience often assumes), he isn’t bleak or sardonic but rather a symbol of Yankee stoicism and countrified wisdom. This audience is large. Indeed, the search patterns of Google users indicate that, in terms of popularity, Frost’s true peers aren’t Pound or Stevens or Eliot, but rather figures like Pablo Picasso and Winston Churchill. Frost is not simply that rare bird, a popular poet; he is one of the best-known personages of the past hundred years in any cultural arena. In all of American history, the only writers who can match or surpass him are Mark Twain and Edgar Allan Poe, and the only poet in the history of English-language verse who commands more attention is William Shakespeare.

This level of recognition makes poetry readers uncomfortable. Poets, we assume, are not popular—at least after 1910 or so. If one becomes popular, then either he must be a second-tier talent catering to mass taste (as Sandburg is often thought to be) or there must be some kind of confusion or deception going on. The latter explanation is generally applied to Frost’s celebrity. As Robert Lowell once put it, “Robert Frost at midnight, the audience gone / to vapor, the great act laid on the shelf in mothballs.” The “great act” is for “the audience” of ordinary readers, but his true admirers know better. He is really a wolf, we say, and it is only the sheep who are fooled. It’s an explanation that Frost himself sometimes encouraged, much as he used to boast about the trickiness of “The Road Not Taken” in private correspondence. (“I’ll bet not half a dozen people can tell who was hit and where he was hit by my Road Not Taken,” he wrote to his friend Louis Untermeyer.) In this sense, the poem is emblematic. Just as millions of people know its language about the road “less traveled” without understanding what that language is actually saying, millions of people recognize its author without understanding what that author was actually doing.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Carol Castaneda:

Have you spare time for just a day? What do you do when you have considerably more or little spare time? Sure, you can choose the suitable activity to get spend your time. Any person spent their own spare time to take a stroll, shopping, or went to the particular Mall. How about open or even read a book entitled The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong? Maybe it is to become best activity for you. You recognize beside you can spend your time with your favorite's book, you can cleverer than before. Do you agree with their opinion or you have various other opinion?

Scott Barbour:

In this 21st one hundred year, people become competitive in each and every way. By being competitive at this point, people have do something to make these survives, being in the middle of the particular crowded place and notice by simply surrounding. One thing that at times many people have underestimated the item for a while is reading. Yeah, by reading a book your ability to survive improve then having chance to endure than other is high. For you who want to start reading the book, we give you this specific The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong book as beginner and daily reading e-book. Why, because this book is more than just a book.

Elizabeth Hager:

People live in this new day of lifestyle always try to and must have the free time or they will get lots of stress from both daily life and work. So , once we ask do people have free time, we will say absolutely sure. People is human not really a robot. Then we ask again, what kind of activity do you have when the spare time coming to you of course your answer can unlimited right. Then ever try this one, reading guides. It can be your alternative inside spending your spare time, the particular book you have read will be The Road Not Taken: Finding America in the Poem Everyone Loves and Almost Everyone Gets Wrong.

Betty Perez:

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