

101 Sonnets: From Shakespeare to Heaney

Don Paterson (editor)

Faber & Faber 1999

A book review by [Danny Yee](http://dannyreviews.com/) © 2001 <http://dannyreviews.com/>

101 Sonnets is a collection of sonnets from a hundred and one different poets, with an informative introduction and some interesting commentary. In the sixteen page introduction Paterson describes the history of the form and some of its more common structures, metres, and rhyme schemes: most familiarly a "turn" between an eight line octet and a six line sestet, iambic pentameter, and Italian (ABBAABBA CDCDCD) or English (ABAB CDCD EFEF GG) rhymes. There are many alternatives to these, however, and Paterson argues that strict definitions of a sonnet are unworkable — "the only qualification for entry in this book is that the poem should have fourteen lines" (and one fails even that).

Many of the selections are unsurprising — poets such as Donne and Keats and Yeats and Dickinson as well as Shakespeare and [Heaney](#) — but many less familiar ones are included, both older poets (John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester, was "a court poet of considerable talent, and quite possibly the rudest in history") and more recent ones (Tony Harrison "has written many fine Meredithian sonnets - sixteen lines, composed of four quatrains"). The sonnets themselves are arranged thematically rather than chronologically or alphabetically. (There are indices of poets and first lines, but no dates either for the poems or the poets.)

Eighteen pages of endnotes offer short paragraph comments on each poem, providing snippets of background and context and touching on issues of form or style. These are thought-provoking — just enough to make one stop and think (and to provide a break between poems) — without ever being obscure or pretentious. One example:

"50 MARILYN HACKER: *Mythology* A witty feminist rewriting of the Ulysses myth - an Italian sonnet, with a slightly late turn in line 9. The variation of the placement of stress within the pentameter line is virtuosic: there's barely one line that states the i.p. explicitly, yet its rhythm is as strongly felt as that of a

jazz drummer under a soloist; the i.p. of late Shakespeare makes an instructive comparison. Hacker has also written some notable sonnet sequences."

All told, *101 Sonnets* is a most engaging little volume.

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