Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft

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The anticipated first collection of essays by celebrated poet Tony Hoagland, author of *What Narcissism Means to Me*

Meanness, the very thing that is unforgivable in human social life, in poetry is thrilling and valuable. Why? Because the willingness to be offensive sets free the ruthless observer in all of us, the spiteful perceptive angel who sees and tells, unimpeded by nicety or second thoughts. There is truth-telling, and more, in meanness. —from "Negative Capability: How to Talk Mean and Influence People"

Tony Hoagland has won The Poetry Foundation's Mark Twain Award, recognizing a poet's contribution to humor in American poetry, and also the Folger Shakespeare Library's O. B. Hardison Jr. Poetry Prize, the only major award that honors a poet's excellence in teaching. *Real Sofistikashun*, from the title onward, uses Hoagland's signature abilities to entertain and instruct as he forages through central questions about how poems behave and how they are made.

In these taut, illuminating essays, Hoagland explores aspects of poetic craft—metaphor, tone, rhetorical and compositional strategies—with the vigorous, conversational style less of the scholar than of the serious enthusiast and practitioner. *Real Sofistikashun* is an exciting, humorous, and provocative collection of essays, as pleasurable a book as it is useful.

Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft Details

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From Reader Review Real Sofistikashun: Essays on Poetry and Craft for online ebook

Mike Schneider says

Sharp thinking, witty, smart writing about poetry — and I suppose I like this writing because I seldom find myself disagreeing with the positions Hoagland stakes out vis-a-vis contemporary poetry. Highly readable -- you don't have to be a PhD lit critter -- & at the same time Hoagland contends with trends & movements a la mode & draws you into the debates.

He's a big tent -- liking many kinds of poetry, I think, not dogmatic, and these essays represent a mind struggling with the current moment of abundance in styles and thinking about poetry that pushes readers to deal with it.

Hoagland comes down in favor of work that engages experience with wit and creativity, the hero here is freedom of the mind, imagination, but also in touch with Earth, and that's how it should be (Hey, listen to me -- ha-ha!).

Reading this book, for me, is like being in a grad student seminar on contemporary poetry with a smart, conversationally adept teacher. He makes me think about things I mostly haven't thought about, not with any kind of clarity anyway . . .

In other words, I learn a lot from this book. Very good on the concept of "tone" -- gives a vocabulary and way of thinking concretely about things not well understood. His essay on "skittery poem of the moment" won an award for best essay of the year in POETRY magazine.

It's like someone who's a real person, not someone who lives in his head, but someone who contends with all the STUFF we all contend with, and at the same time, unpretentiously, can hold his own intellectually -- but in readable prose expressing common sense thinking -- with the theories and head games.

Way to go Tony.

-- Michael

Ken says

Maybe I like Tony Hoagland talking *about* poetry as much as I like him writing poetry. Though, to be fair, I've now read more of his essays than his poetry.

One essay in particular struck me: "On Disproportion." He got going about Apollonians vs. Dionysians, those big tent camps on either side of the poetry river, and I realized, as a poet, I played Apollo's lyre a little too much. Maybe a little experimentation -- even if it sucked (and it did) -- wouldn't hurt.

He gave an Oscar Wilde quote I liked, from "The Decay of Lying":

"Enjoy nature! I am glad to say that I have entirely lost that faculty... What art really reveals to us is nature's

lack of design, her curious crudities, her extraordinary monotony, her absolutely unfinished condition... If nature had been comfortable, mankind would never have invented architecture, and I prefer house to the open air. In a house we all feel the proper proportions. Everything is subordinated to us.... Egotism itself, which is so necessary to a proper sense of human dignity, is entirely the result of indoor life."

Reading it, I thought of what a homebody hypocrite I am. I love nature, but only under controlled circumstances and often only on vacation. When I get out of work, I tend to crave the comfort of four walls, of predictability, of boredom masquerading as bourgeois comfort. Nice.

Hoagland says Wilde's praise of housing is also a praise of art. It "implies that making art is a matter of editing and arranging. Though [Wilde] concedes that such order may be illusory, he doesn't care. He is more frank than most artists about the ego drive that lurks behind making and the need to make the ego feel safe. The goal, as he presents it, is security; the method for achieving it is subordination; subordination, for example, of illustration to concept. Similarly, in a clean, well-lighted poem, we might suppose that the use of figurative language would be rationed carefully; likewise, extraneous details might be eliminated. Control, control! Psychologically speaking, the word *repression* might be appropriate here."

It got me to thinking about my poetry. Guilty as charged. And the poetry of many other poets I read. Also guilty as charged. Where's the wildebeest when you need him? And why can't we all just get along, Messieurs Apollo and Dionysius? Do we have to be labeled and shelved as one or the other?

So I tried to let it all hang out with a chancy poem. Which I shared. Which was pretty much frowned upon by my fellow Apollonians.

Hoagland finishes the essay with this fine anecdote:

"I have a friend who once edited a poetry magazine and returned manuscripts with a note saying, 'a little more *savoir faire*, please.' Arch and arrogant, I thought at the time. Now I can understand, I think, what he meant, and reading many poems I, too, often want to say, 'a little more excess, style, violence, *savoir faire*, please.'"

And so, along with my usual fare, I'll write some *savoir*. You know -- unusual. Sir Lancelot meets Sir Real. And if my friends who love form poems, structure, sanity in the house, stop reading me, so be it.

I want to sing to both house and sky. It's a tall order, but what the hell. You only die once. And doesn't have to be in 14 lines with 5 unstressed and stressed beats per and a rhyme scheme dictator, does it? (Rhetorical question)

Cameron Scott says

Clear, concise (mostly) and easy to follow. Suprisingly fulfilling.

Drinkable even. Makes me wish I was back in college (almost).

Being placed by Vendler. Really. Amazing how little has changed in half a century though.

This is the new hybrid SUV of the craft world.

Caroline says

One small complaint: some of the “here’s a poem; now let me digest it for you” passages lost my attention. I really enjoyed some, but for the most part found these poem break-downs either too plentiful or too exhausting. However, this could be a virtue—an element that helps make the book accessible to any audience (which, I believe, it pretty much is).

Most intriguing essays:
“Altitudes, a Homemade Taxonomy”
This whole first essay made me squirm, but, in retrospect, in the most valuable way that one can squirm. 1) Hoagland immediately employs fashionable terms like “yoga” and “chakras,” which made me a little nervous that I’d entered an “I’m ok, you’re ok, all poems are ok” meditation workshop or something. (I was wrong, though, so that’s good). 2) He sets up this taxonomy that equates poetic drive with chakras, then says, “choose which chakra your poems come from.” I never liked multiple choice, so again, I’m nervous. (But, he knows, and I know, that I don’t really have to choose only one option, so that’s good too). 3) When he refers to the rhetoric in one of my favorite Stevens poems as “frothy” and “immaterial,” it hurt my feelings. (I’m over it now, though, and actually, his argument is pretty compelling. So, that’s good.)

“Two Roads Diverged”
Traces how Matthews and Levis changed throughout their careers. Succinct but keen discussion that does justice to both.

“On Disproportion”
Moves from “proportionate” Horace and Williams poems to some very squirmy, “disproportionate” poems. I love his whole discussion of the value of disproportion—extravagance, hyperbole, ecstasy, and versus formality. To my knowledge, disproportion isn’t addressed greatly in contemporary criticism, at least not so deliberately.

“Polka Dots, Stripes and Plaids”
Complicated, but in no way confusing. Hoagland essentially emcees the “compositional language” vs. “referential language” showdown. Respectfully and entertainingly investigates problems and virtues of both.

“Thingitude and Causailty” and “Fashion Victims”
Refreshing indictment of what Hoagland sees as the current trend in hip, young American poetry. “Fashion Victims” sounds (to me) a little like a turf war (my poetry is better than yours), which I find thrilling. Both essays are fascinating in that they deal with, what seems to me, more complicated matters than the first few essays address. They also provide more of a personal aesthetic than any other essays; I’d feel disappointed if he’d left these out.

Kasandra says

I took a long time with this, highlighting and making margin notes. Hoagland is very good at explaining/describing various parts of what make up a good (or not so good) poem, and I learned here more

about what I tend to gravitate toward as well as avoid, and why, as a poet. I feel like this book helped me understand modern/post-modern/contemporary poetry (the "intentionally difficult" sort) better than I had. And his last chapter on being mean is the best, and true. Probably not interesting to those who aren't poets, and people who are great writers won't need to read it, but if you feel like a perpetual student of poetry, as I do, you'll probably enjoy it and take away some food for thought/for trying differently or better when writing.

James says

I've always liked Hoagland's poetry, and this collection of essays hits with the same humor and wit as his collections of verse. The topics here swing from examinations of specific poets and their poems to poetry in general. While "craft" is in the title, he doesn't focus on crafwork (this is an iamb, this is pentameter) as much as he focuses on the workings of a poem, image, metaphor, rhetoric, et cetera, and how they function together to create a cohesive whole. Hoagland expects you to know something about poetry before reading this, but nonetheless, nothing here is too over-the-top or academic to the degree that a newcomer to poetry couldn't enjoy the essays here.

Lenora Good says

I can't think of anything I enjoy more than reading a good poem unless it's reading a good essay, and in this book, I had the best of both worlds. It was not easy forcing myself to read one essay at a time, rather than to read the book cover to cover.

Hoagland's book talks about modern poetry in an easy-to-understand and accessible manner; he discusses many of the current poets, and how and why they write as they do.

If you're a poet, there are jewels of great value to be mined in real sofistikashun, if you're a reader of poetry, this book will become necessary to your bedside table. (If you put it on the shelf, it may not be as readily available as you will want.)

Buy this book! Read this book! You will not be sorry.

Marcio Saito says

This was the text book for a UCLA workshop.

While I appreciate Hoagland's poems I read and liked most of them, he is most certainly not what I would call an essayist. His essays on poetry are convoluted and offer very poor effort-to-insight ratio for the student of poetry.

The book was dropped from the class after most students complained.

If you are fan of Hoagland and want to have a collection of essays with "poetic" aspirations, go ahead and

get it. If you are a beginner poet seeking to gain understanding of the craft, look elsewhere.

Richard says

Tony Hoagland's poetry already hint subtly at his attention to detail and craft, so the depth to which he can explore the creation of poetry in these essays comes as no surprise. But while Hoagland can write with precision about the marriage of rhetoric, diction and image in poetry and analyze the minutiae of tone and its complexities, he still preserves a delight for the spontaneity of writing and promotes a certain kind of un-knowingness in the process of creation.

This last point is very refreshing to see, for the trap of the basic contradictory action of writing exposition about creative writing is often to dictate or at least suggest conscious focus on the complexities of writing poetry, and all too often essays about poetry writing become flat shells about a very multi-dimensional process. Hoagland resists the impulse to prescribe, if it ever comes to him at all, and instead celebrates the end effects of wonderful poetry. When he does discuss the creation of poetry, he is an advocate of student-mind and fresh outlooks and the ability to change and adapt, as he does in his essays about particular poets like Pinsky and Gluck. Hoagland also defines well the pleasures of schools like language poetry and its energetic playfulness, but identifies fairly where they fall short of being thoroughly satisfying.

But don't take all of this as an impression that the book is stuffy and overly academic. Hoagland maintains a sense of humor through this book, keeping his language accessible and familiar.

Though I sometimes quibbled with Hoagland's choices of poets worthy of very particular attention in their own essays, and in the end I was no more of a fan of the work of these poets than before his praise of them, this sequence of essays will be enlightening to those familiar with the art of poetry. Though this book may prove a little more difficult for those without as much experience already in the craft of poetry, it is worth a slow, deliberate read.

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secondwomn says

there's an underlying sense of the engine of poetry that doesn't resonate with my engine.

Sarah Sammis says

Real Sofistkashun by Tony Hoagland is a collection of essays on how to read and write poetry. It's broken up by technique and each essay contains numerous examples.

Avid readers or writers of poetry will get the most out of the book. Hoagland expects readers to have read the same poets he has and he makes no effort to introduce the poets, their poems or the concepts they illustrate. You will either get his point or you won't.

Since I'm not an avid reader or writer of poetry, I didn't get much out of the book. I had hoped I would but I didn't make it past the fourth essay.

Jenn Mar says

I always recommend this to creative writing students who've already taken Poetry 101 and need something more advanced, not prescriptive. All writers should read this, not just poets. Makes me think about fiction and essays in new ways.

Carol says

Having reread the book, I still am not quite sure why the title is spelled so oddly. Maybe it was the author gently poking fun at himself and reminding us not to take things too seriously. I did notice that the first essay did touch on various dimensions in poems, including level of sophistication.

I liked it well enough on this rereading to keep it on my bookshelf next to some books on writing poetry. Either I have mellowed, or erasing those excessive underlinings made it better for me. And I have to admit the author was not so taken with "skitterish" modernist poems as it had seemed to me the first time.

Still 3 stars

The title intrigued me. And irritated me. And the book never gives any explanation for the odd spelling - or even why the title was chosen.

Because it's about poetry, I will probably keep my copy, but it's the least favorite of my books about poetry. My favorite books about poetry inspire me to write new verse. This book didn't produce new work, although - perhaps coincidentally - I did rewrite a poem I had worked on before about a hitchhiking bee. The book is all about modern poetics, that use little or no rhythm/rhyme. Learning about poetic forms (think Rondeau, for instance) often generates an attempt to use the new form, but there was none of that here.

Some of the examples are interesting. Although I'm still not convinced that the work of Apollinaire is all that great.

I read this book twice. The first time through, I was distracted by all the marginal notes added by the previous owner. I assume it was for a college class - only selected essays got the note-taking treatment. Most of the notes were simply vocabulary (and on words I was already familiar with, although the one word that I had to look up lacked a notation).

Now a bit of back story. I subscribe to Poetry magazine. When it arrives, I am often excited to see what's within. Then I'm disappointed to find nothing I like. I struggle with the section the editor calls "Commentary." Much of the writing is in extreme academic language, and I find it singularly opaque. So I definitely found Tony Hoagland's essays more readable. But on the second reading, I found that I still wasn't "getting it." For example, the essay "Sad Anthropologists" which was about tone left me wondering if I even know what was meant by tone, and if I could ever learn to identify it when I saw it.

The last essay left me feeling unhappy with the whole book. Maybe that's unfair, but there it is. His point was that poetry with a bit of "meanness" was more, shall I say, meaningful. He even complained about a Marianne Moore poem ("The Mind is a Wonderful Thing") for not being mean enough. Give me a break!

Jeannine says

I love the essay on the virtues of "mean" in poetry...

David says

I'm a fan of Tony Hoagland and was not let down by this 2006 collection of essays on poetry and the craft of making (and understanding) poetry. In fact, I have to admit, I was a bit surprised and delighted at the subject of many of these fine essays, which take a spontaneous but insightful look at much "difficult" contemporary poetry that is often neglected or disparaged by other poets. Hoagland offers real insight in a number of these essays and helped me see the broad shifting landscape of poetic possibility with a new angle of clarity, which I appreciate, especially the later essays in the book. "Polka Dots, Stripes, and Plaids", "Fragment, Juxtaposition, and Completeness", "Thingitude and Causality", and "Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment" all seem excellent starting points to understanding the recent (maybe) developments in poetry. If I were a teacher, I would think Hoagland's essays would provide a viable starting point for students and beginning readers to the wide range of poetry currently being practiced. I also like that Hogaland remains, at times, rather critical and sharp towards poetic fashion and points out the inherent limitations of certain forms and poetic strategies. Hoagland knows that our best poets have much in their poetic toolkit, but some tools may, in the end, be more effective for the job and lasting poems (and poets) be few and far between. These kind of casual, clear-headed insights could only come from an accomplished poet who loves first and foremost the language, the variety of forms speech is rolled in, and the range of sounds, from guttural to holy, that make up our language. Worth many reads.
