



Poetry Is Useless

Anders Nilsen

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In *Poetry is Useless*, Anders Nilsen redefines the sketchbook format, intermingling elegant, densely detailed renderings of mythical animals, short comics drawn in ink, meditations on religion, and abstract shapes and patterns. Page after page gives way under Nilsen's deft hatching and perfectly placed pen strokes, revealing his intellectual curiosity and wry outlook on life's many surprises.

Stick people debate the dubious merits of economics. Immaculately stippled circles become looser and looser, as craters appear on their surface. A series of portraits capture the backs of friends' heads. For ten or twenty pages at a time, *Poetry is Useless* becomes a travel diary, in which Nilsen shares anecdotes about his voyages in Europe and North America. A trip to Colombia for a comics festival is recounted in carefully drawn city streets and sketches made in cafes. *Poetry is Useless* reveals seven years of Nilsen's life and musings: beginning in 2007, it covers a substantial period of his comics career to date, and includes visual reference to his books, such as *Dogs & Water*, *Rage of Poseidon*, and the *New York Times* Notable Book *Big Questions*. This expansive sketchbook-as-graphic-novel is exquisitely packaged with appendices and a foreword from Anders Nilsen himself.

Poetry Is Useless Details

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Author : Anders Nilsen

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Elizabeth A says

I found this one both fascinating and frustrating. What is it? That's a good question. It is part sketchbook, memoir, travelogue, brain dump, and musings. There are parts that I loved, but so much of the text was unreadable - this either needed to be a larger format book, or come with a magnifying glass attached. I love the artistic style of his work, and this volume will certainly inspire you to pick up your sketchbook.

Keith says

There is about half of *Poetry is Useless* that is pure, absolute gold -- page after page of strange musings and word-image haikus that just feel so totally *right*. At the end of a bad weekend in which, once again, the world is ending and horror and doom have won, Nilsen's weird brand of pseudo-intellectual pseudo-babble hits me right where my heart and brains intersect.

"You are a beast, an animal, snuffling in the dirt," one of the many nameless silhouettes that haunt the panels says to the reader. "This theory you have, that you were formed from the clay by the hand of God, given special attention, your life breathed into you by his very breath: it's a fiction. You are no different than the insects, the worms, some feral bog. In fact the very conceit at the heart of your theory debases even this lonely status. No worm thinks it was made in the image of God."

Nilsen's ability to blend existential quandary, modern cynicism, pithy one-liners and elegant drawing and design makes *Poetry is Useless* one of the most thoughtful, penetrating books I've read in a long time...but not for the entirety of its 200 pages. The book consists of short cartoons originally published on Nilsen's Tumblr over a span of years. And as the book wears on, there's the sense here that Nilsen's troubled, pensive narratives might not be as earnest as they first seem -- that the snark and irony of the collection, the likability (and clickability) of each entry is in fact more important than the unanswerable questions it raises about the meaning of life (or lack thereof). "Poetry is useless" is the only repeated phrase throughout the book, and at the beginning this statement feels at once like an artistic call to arms and a woeful nihilistic truth: we must create art, we must find meaning, even if we understand the ultimate fruitlessness of these things.

But by the the book's end, after pages of characters speaking remixed truisms and lazy political commentary ("If the CEO of Halliburton falls in the forest, does it make a sound?"), condemnations of any working-class individual who does NOT make art, and visual name-droppings of every hip cartoonist Nilsen knows or has ridden on a flight to SPX with, elements of *Poetry is Useless* start to wear thin. It begins to feel that the Nilsen has an axe to grind *against* the pretension of trying to find any meaning in the universe (via poetry or any other medium). It feels like he has collapsed in the middle of a very genuine and real soul-search, and come up with the unequivocal answer that thinking too hard is dumb, that trying to articulate his own intentions is pointless (this last point culminates in a very literal comparison of himself to Jackson Pollock at the book's end).

I don't expect *Poetry is Useless* to provide answers to the questions it raises, but I'm also not interested in the way Nilsen continually bails out of digging past a surface-level rumination on the state of the world. There has always been something equally intriguing and frustrating about his work, but the narrative structures, aesthetic quality, and entertainment value in a book like *Big Questions* provides Nilsen with just enough

cover that you can afford him the benefit of the doubt when his thematic arcs collapse in expected ways. Here, that artifice is stripped away entirely -- sometimes to great effect. But more often to reveal very little but more artifice underneath.

Sara says

Like Donald Barthelme and George Saunders decided to merge bodies and then make absurdistish drawings instead of writing short stories. Or kinda like if Yoko ONO's Grapefruit was a series of drawings and mini-comic instructions.

Stephanie says

There's an index in the back of this despairing meditation. This book inspired me to make more time for sketching. I like the way he draws trees, mythical creatures, and the pipe-like maps or root systems. Sadness, travel, and politics abound. I'm more excited about the feel of the work than the content.

Liam says

These are photographs of Nilsen's sketchbook.

From that starting point it's hard for me to love this. It's filled with great ideas and funny quips, but it reads like a stand-up "comic" routine insofar as the ideas are punchy but undeveloped relative to what you might want from a narrative. His work tries to get at serious intellectual issues more so than other graphic artists I have read, albeit he has a penchant for modest nihilistic or nonsensical tangents that muddy the mood he'd cultivated in the earlier panels. Is he trying to suggest an idea, or show how rapidly one can lose faith in one? (Perhaps the idea here is the symbol for all of what poetry provides.)

I think that aligns with how I feel about Nilsen's work. If he could condense, order and balance the ideas that his content and art style already contain I would declare myself a fan. Till then, this is too messy to get earn any more than a few laughs from bewilderment or surprise.

Marc says

Hard to classify this one--kind of an assortment of smaller pieces, memoir, and sketchbook. Filled here and there with little gems, funny exercises, and laugh-out-loud revelations. It's a bit like looking inside someone else's mind while they're doodling. Certainly worthwhile, but I would recommend Big Questions as a better starting point for Anders Nilsen's work. I always look forward to reading whatever he creates.

Zane Chleboun says

Absurdly beautiful, as is the way of Anders Nilsen. Meaningless tidbits here and there painted with philosophical ideas/thoughts and humorous stories, personal and fictional. I have to admit, there are pages in this book that made me cry in public.

Zoe Hannay says

"I really liked this. I'm going to give it 3 stars."

"But you really liked it. Why don't you give it 5 stars?"

Abram says

Completely pointless, some would say self indulgent. I loved this entertaining "mess". Anyone into offbeat, unpredictable absurd humor would appreciate this.

Jarrah says

The sketchbook/memoir/travelogue that is *Poetry is Useless* actually raises just as many big questions as Nilsen's previous graphic novel, *Big Questions*. Nilsen's simple silhouettes debating politics, love and God are extraordinarily relevant and important, with moments of deep cynicism but also others of hope. The drawings - of dogs, people on trains and planes, forests, abstract shapes and more - inserted in the margins and pages in between are not only enjoyable to look at but also well placed to give the reader a chance to process the bigger thoughts addressed in the cartoons.

vostendrasamigos yotengolibros says

What can I say of a book that keep me company in so many poops?, I love the existencial sense of humor of Anders Nilsen, for me it's a book that you can read in every way that you what but you will not want to miss a page because you can be missing something amazing and I found it better to read real slow and from time to time, but it's fun and beautiful and casual.

Emilia P says

GUHHHHHH ANDERSSSSS. Why does everyone think you are such a freaking genius? Guhhh. I mean, you are a pretty good illustrator when you want to be, which is like 1/4 of this book. But for your nihilistic, existential, mopey mopes, I just found myself thinking about how I would rather be reading Gabby Schulz (little known but much beloved of me) who is also nihilistic, and self-destructive, and mopey as hell, but also is super-open about his messed up own self and critical of a real world that real people live in. If you're going to be such a mope, do it in the real world! Anders, get your head out of the damn clouds. Or me, stop going up there to read his stuff. Yeesh.

Marco Morano says

Wow, this graphic novel sure was... something. It felt extremely unique and strange and I have the feeling that I'll never read another book like this in a long time. I think the strangeness that is this graphic novel kinda won me over to giving it four stars. I LOVED the way it kinda made fun of society and religion and how out there this novel is. There were a few moments though where I was confused on what was going on (this is most prominent in the first half) and the ending had me a bit disappointed. Either way, this definitely is a book that will stick with me for awhile.

David Schaafsma says

A sketchbook that masquerades as a graphic novel (the back cover claims it is sketchbook-as-graphic-novel). A beautiful art object of a book with.. texture. Travelogue, memoir, sketches, philosophical aphorisms, one liners, all collected from a 7 year period. The sketches are deliberately juxtaposed with stuff from his online blog. The comics are like his work in other books clearly quick sketch quality, sometimes with little simple icons for characters, sometimes more realistic figures. It's a combination of dark vision and hilarity.

I see that some people just do not "get" it, and give up (as with other work by Nilsen, to which I imagine he would reply, "there's nothing to GET!")

Keith's review is the best I saw at a glance: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Stephanie calls this a "despairing meditation" and that seems right, mostly.

Zane calls it "absurdly beautiful" and that gets at the absurdism if not nihilism that he seems to see in human existence. And beauty, often just stunningly rendered art work.

To what end? Some people take the title, oft-related throughout, as literally true for him. Poetry, art, serves no ultimate purpose. It's a kind of statement of despair.

I think I tend to think of it in the light of Samuel Beckett, "I can't go on, I'll go on." These are dark times we are living in, feeling more and more apocalyptic with more mass shootings in the US than days of the year. Endless wars, polar ice caps melting as capitalists debate when to end the world, and so on. Why do art under these circumstances? Nilsen seems to say, I dunno, but I have to keep doing this. And then what happens: Waiting for Godot.

Okay, this ain't Waiting for Godot, but it is in that realm, I think. I think in times of existential crisis, it is hard to see why we should go on, why we should engage in the arts. But then we have this artifact, this beauty, this statement against the void. But you know, if I were to leave it there I would be selling the stuff short; it's also playful, silly, downright funny. He's light-hearted in all of it. Hey, so is Waiting for Godot, and almost all of Nilsen's work might reference Beckett's despair and humor.

I think if you are interested in Nilsen on the basis of this review you should check out his blog, you should start by reading Big Questions or Dogs and Water. I love this stuff.

Leah says

This collection was witty, gripping, artistic, eye-opening, and important. Despite the differences in opinion that Anders Nilsen and I have about faith and other life things, I experienced a deep sense of understanding from Nilsen, especially considering how he talks about bouts of depression, evil, and grief.

His humor reminds me of Demetri Martin: poignantly clever and simple at times. I look forward to reading more of Nilsen's works and being stunned by his abstract illustrations.
