

Don  
Paterson  
40 Sonnets

Poetry

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*Don Paterson*

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# 40 Sonnets

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## 40 Sonnets Don Paterson

This new collection from Don Paterson, his first since the Forward prize-winning *Rain* in 2009, is a series of forty sonnets. Some take a more traditional form, some are highly experimental, but what these poems share is a lyrical intelligence and musical gift that has been visible in his work since his first book of poems, *Nil Nil*, in 1993.

Addressed to children, friends and enemies, the living and the dead, musicians, poets and dogs, these poems display an ambition in their scope and tonal range matched by the breadth of their concerns. Here, voices call home from the blackout and the airlock, the storm cave and the séance, the coalshed, the war, the ringroad, the forest and the sea. These are voices frustrated by distance, by shot glass and bar rail, by the dark, leaving the 'sound that fades up from the hiss, / like a glass some random downdraught had set ringing, / now full of its only note, its lonely call . . .'

In *40 Poems* Paterson returns to some of his central themes - contradiction and strangeness, tension and transformation, the dream world, and the divided self - in some of the most powerful and formally assured poems he has written to date. This is a rich and accomplished new work from one of the foremost poets writing in English today.

## 40 Sonnets Details

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Author : Don Paterson

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## From Reader Review 40 Sonnets for online ebook

### C. Varn says

To say Paterson is laconic and presents his poetic speakers as unsympathetic could be considered an understatement: he is not humorless, but his humor here is black, and none of the chatty elements in his early collections are here. All but one of those poems is a traditional sonnet--"The Version" being a darkly humorous prose poem about translation in the vein of Nicanor Parra--the rhyme, topics, and meter swift dramatically within the lines from conventional to analogous to just a bit weird. Paterson shows himself to be the master of the form. Yet the quality of the work suffers because the thematic range seems limited the Paterson's tonal range: there is little obvious joy here to balance out dark and sometimes bitingly dry wit. Yet the work Paterson has done on Shakespeare sonnets served him while and while these 40 sonnets may actually be too much of a good thing, his genius is apparent even if it sometimes seems a bit airless and glum.

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### Rawan says

eh

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### Graham Hiscock says

An excellent and fascinating collection. These are sonnets with a difference - Paterson sticks to the 14 line format but plays with and often ignores the other conventions of the form. Favourites: A Powercut, and the heartbreakin A Threshold.

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### Larry Olson says

Moving prose from this Scottish poet all (or mostly) in 14 lines!

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### George Witte says

I went back to school on these sonnets, with a sense that the form and its possibilities were newly revealed to me. The poems seem natural growths that attain their full maturity in 14 lines, rather than being jammed into an uncomfortable suit or stretched to fit 8 lines' worth of poetry into 14. There are many memorable poems here, and simply a high level of quality throughout the entire book; it's just plain better than most. Standouts include The Wave, The Air, A Powercut, Funeral Prayer (which I can imagine being read at services, what a lovely elegy), Francesca Woodman, A Threshold, and Souls. Highly recommended.

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### **Claudia says**

Winner of the UK's Costa prize in 2016...this is a very entertaining book of sonnets by Scottish author Don Paterson. It was an easy read and at many times rather funny. I think this is good contemporary poetry. But not great. 3 Stars.

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### **rosamund says**

some absolute gems in here; beautiful and unexpected, and a thoughtful use of the form. mixed in with some experiments or joke sonnets that do not seem to sit comfortably with the exemplary ones. i found it an uneven but very worthwhile collection and i know i will come back to it again and again.

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### **James Murphy says**

These are sonnets in every conceivable form, I'd guess. Some are traditional in form and meter, some are experimental. One, "Seance," seems to be in some kind of code I couldn't make heads or tails of, though it reminded me, sparked, most likely, by the title, of the poetry in James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover*. I thought most of them elegant.

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### **Pamela Scott says**

<https://thebookloversboudoir.wordpress...>

This is my first time reading the poet.

I really enjoyed this collection. Sonnets are now my favourite type of poem. I've always considered them old-fashioned and high-brow. Paterson went some way towards changing my mind.

I particularly enjoyed The Air, The Six, A Powercut, Lacrima, A Vow and Seven Questions about the Journey.

What struck me about this collection is how versatile and diverse the sonnets were, in both form and subject. I always had this idea of what a sonnet should look and read like and Paterson has cleverly cleaved this through the middle.

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### **Gail says**

You never "finish" poetry but I've given each entry a cursory look and will revisit at some point. Was particularly delighted with the two poems on Francesca Woodman's photography. She's an artist I'm rather obsessed with and I plan on Re-reading this alongside her work.

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### **Paul says**

I really enjoy Don Paterson's poetry and his book on Shakespeare's sonnets is a great read too. So it is nice to see him bring out a new collection of poems. These aren't all traditional sonnets, and they don't tell a story or function as a sequence of sonnets through the book although some themes crop up repeatedly. Some of the sonnets that I enjoyed most raised a smirk of recognition as I read them, such as a rant about Dundee City Council or a moan about poetry audiences lack of interest in hearing the actual poems. Others are more political and biting, maybe none moreso than a sonnet on the death of a child in Gaza. I always find with Don Paterson's poems that many of them click or just resonate on the first reading, then they reveal more on looking back at them again and that is true of this collection too.

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### **Rebecca Foster says**

All but one of the poems in this new book have the sonnet's traditional 14 lines; "The Version" is a short prose story about writing an untranslatable poem. However, even in the more conventional verses, there is a wide variety of both subject matter and rhyme scheme. Topics range from love and death to a phishing phone call and a footpath blocked off by Dundee City Council. A few favorites were "A Powercut," set in a stuck elevator; "Seven Questions about the Journey," an eerie call-and-response; and "Mercies," a sweet elegy to an old dog put to sleep. There weren't quite enough stand-outs here for my liking, but I appreciated the book as a showcase for just how divergent in form sonnets can be.

See my full review at [Nudge](#).

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### **Victoria says**

fantastic & varied selection of sonnets.

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### **Michael Arnold says**

I've heard some good things about this book, and there are some poems here I really do like. Some of this book went way over my head, but I was very tired when I read it (had just come home from a day at work, I don't do well in heat). I'll be keeping ahold of this book for a long time, it's just too interesting. I guess this is an initial half-thought, but it's mildly positive; that's a good start!

The more I read this book the more I will appreciate it, I know that already, and I'm sure I'll rate it higher than when I've read this a few more times.

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### **Anne, Unfinished Woman says**

Rather a mixed bag of poems I liked and those that were strange. However, the sonnet "Funeral Prayer" goes on my list of those to be read when I cock up my toes, and "Mercies" is particularly poignant.

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### **Matt says**

This is a lovely collection that rambles across from grief to childhood to the supernatural (kind of) to poetry itself. It took me a while to warm up to it, to get the "ear" for Paterson who is one of very few (Successful) people still writing this stuff. I was intrigued and when it started to make its way, I wasn't disappointed. You have to make the effort though, I think. It doesn't necessarily come easily.

That said, it's so short that going over all or some of it twice is fine. Then again, £14.99 is a little steep for a volume this slender.

To Dundee City Council and The Version were two highlights, the latter a rather splendid piece of prose dumped right in the middle of a stream of uniformish poetry.

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### **Val Penny says**

I was given the book, 40 Sonnets by Don Paterson as a birthday gift by a friend. I enjoy the form of the sonnet and this modern collection is exquisite. Don Paterson is regarded as one of the most skilled formal poets writing in English today. He has won an intimidating array of Forward Prizes including T.S. Eliot Prizes, Fabers and Whitbreads. 40 Sonnets (2015) is his latest work.

All but one of the poems in this new book have the sonnet's traditional 14 lines; "The Version" is a short prose story about writing an untranslatable poem. However, even in the more conventional verses, there is a wide variety of both subject matter and rhyme scheme. I delight in moving from one topic to another when they are all so beautifully covered.

Amongst the topics covered are the traditional subjects of love and death to the less obvious topics of a phishing phone call and a footpath blocked off by Dundee City Council. A few favorites were "A Powercut," set in a stuck elevator; "Seven Questions about the Journey," an eerie call-and-response; and "Mercies," a sweet elegy to an old dog put to sleep and a satirical sonnet referencing former UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair.

I enjoy this book, 40 Sonnets very much and, I often read from it at poetry meetings. If you enjoy poetry, I highly recommend it.

The poet, Don Paterson, OBE, FRSL, was born in 1963. He is a noted Scottish poet, writer and musician.

Val Penny

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### **Martin Peel says**

I like reading poetry. It challenges you on so many levels and in ways that the novels don't. This was

recommended in the Waterstones that I was in and I picked it up. The sonnet is an accessible poetic form, 14 lines, could be iambic, but maybe not, could be a number of different forms, but maybe not, could be personal, but maybe not; I thought I would give it a go.

Don Patterson has a distinctive voice. The sonnets are varied in their form, subject matter and voice. I enjoyed the variation, humor and vivacity of the verse. Patterson experiments with the form, but he uses this exploration to unearth truth. Be that a personal truth or more universal truth. Love, loss, life death, childhood, family, amongst other subjects are engagingly explored.

The last poem of the volume is a ode to that disappeared playground staple; the roundabout. On that whirligig, you used to be able to get that wonderful feeling of spinning out of control on that whirligig. This volume is never out of control but it is certainly a rush of feelings, ideas, and images. I hope you enjoy it as I did.

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### **Jenna says**

Don Paterson is regarded as one of the most skilled formal poets writing in English today, winner of an intimidating array of Forward Prizes, T.S. Eliot Prizes, Fabers, Whitbreads, etc., etc., and *40 Sonnets* (2015) is his latest. All these poems have the air of being "*New Yorker* poems" -- polished, flintily intelligent, highbrow -- though there is more formal variation here than the book's title might suggest: some of the poems are sonnets in the most traditional sense of the term, while others are written in iambic tetrameter couplets rhymed *AABBCC...*, while still others are in free verse. The most experimental poem here, "Seance," is fourteen lines long, it is true, but the first two lines go like this: "S p e k e . - s e e s s k s e e k / i e i k s e s s e - . - e s k k s e - s s k."

*40 Sonnets* contains imitations of Du Fu and Gottfried Benn, tributes to favorite jazz musicians and to the TV show *House*, excoriations of Tony Blair and of the violence in Gaza, and an homage to photographer Francesca Woodman written in the form of seven aphoristic self-contained heroic couplets (the seventh: "All rooms will hide you, if you stand just so. / All ghosts know this. That's really all they know"). Other poems appear to take cues from less obvious sources of inspiration, like John Crowe Ransom (whose "Piazza Piece" expanded the way we conceive of the divide between octave and sestet) and Arthur Rimbaud. "Fit," for example, seems to have an affinity to Rimbaud's "Le Dormeur du val":

*Back there a boy lies where he fell.  
How long he's lain he cannot tell  
but he is bored with his review  
of dirt and roots and wants it through.  
Fit your four limbs to his stain  
you'll find you cannot rise again.*

Many of the collection's most emotionally effective poems touch on death in some way. There is "Funeral Prayer," which really deserves to be read by everyone in its entirety, but which I'll quote only a few lines of here:

*May the human dream  
arise again to find him woken  
at its heart, though to be spoken*

*once is as miraculous  
as a thousand times.*

"[T]o be spoken / once is as miraculous / as a thousand times": I believed that fervidly as a preteen playing with the idea of faith for the first time and still hope it to be true now.

"A Threshold" is a movingly understated poem about bereavement, with a gut punch in its *rime riche*-rhymed final couplet: "This place again. It's where / I wake up and recall I have no daughter / or fall asleep and dream I have no daughter."

"Apsinthion" turns romanticized depictions of warfare on their head: "did we choose to die like sheep? / Hell no - we were *men*, and blessed / to know the hour and place.... I jest. / One by one we fell asleep...."

"Seven Questions About the Journey" also subverts literary conventions, this time the conventions of the ballad form, to paint a haunting picture of the refugee journey, a hallucinatory mix of Auden's "Refugee Blues" and Auden's "O What Is That Sound":

*If the weather is stormy, should we go nonetheless?*

- None forecast

*Where are the dogs and the horses? Should we guess?*

- Slain. Shot. Gassed

One last favorite I must mention is "A Calling," which is an example of my very favorite kind of thing -- a sonnet-shaped modernization of an old figment of folklore (in this case, the Greek myth of Actaeon and Diana) that ends up being about something more, something infinitely deeper: "all my ghost-dogs thrash along the shore, / the dark sea at their back like the police," the last lines intone, with the implication being that the dogs threatening to cannibalize the poet are his own poems; that, in the end, if we are lucky, our work will consume us -- rend us limb from limb -- and survive us.

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