



## The Life of Poetry

*Muriel Rukeyser , Jane Cooper (Foreword by)*

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Observing that poetry is a natural part of our pastimes and rituals, Muriel Rukeyser opposes elitist attitudes and confronts Americans' fear of feeling. Multicultural and interdisciplinary, this collection of essays and speeches makes an irrefutable case for the centrality of poetry in American life.

## The Life of Poetry Details

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Author : Muriel Rukeyser , Jane Cooper (Foreword by)

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# From Reader Review The Life of Poetry for online ebook

## Sherry Chandler says

I was not a good reader of this book, maybe because it's out of a time that I know little about. A lot of the cultural references Rukeyser makes mean little to me, so I felt that I needed a key to unlock the code. Reading it was like wading through deep water and occasionally encountering the buoy of a quotable quote. Reading it also made me very sad because, in 1949, Rukeyser seemed to have great hopes for a world transformed by art and poetry. Fifty years on, engaged in what George W. Bush called "the first war of the twenty-first century," that hope looks pretty well crushed.

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## Maggie says

I wanted to love this book. I really like Rukeyser's poetry, and she was a boundary-busting activist who did not separate that activism from her creative work. There were some great moments in these essays - "...remember what happened to you when you came to your poem, any poem whose truth overcame all inertia in you at that moment, so that your slow mortality took its proper place, and before it the light of a new awareness was not something new, but something you \*recognized\*" (35) - I just had difficulty getting on board with the whole "fear of poetry" concept. I know these essays were originally lectures; perhaps they didn't translate as well on the page. And my mind kept wandering, and I kept losing my place. I don't know. Maybe I'll try the book again in a few years, and it'll 'click' - at this point, I am moving on.

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## Steven says

I finished reading this book on the second anniversary of the attacks on September 11, 2001. In those two years, it felt to me that our country was in a constant state of war, with each other and with the world. Muriel Rukeyser wrote the first edition of this book following the end of World War II, in the wake of our country's controversial choice to use nuclear bombs to end the war with Japan. The poignancy of this parallel informed and haunted my reading of this passionately intelligent treatise on the peaceful effects poetry could have in our culture. As I read it, at first I was frustrated by how little progress has been made since 1949 to bring poetry out into the broader culture. Also, it reminded me of the vast ground that poetry has covered. But mostly, it made me realize that poets have to keep saying these things until people listen. And they aren't listening yet, as made abundantly clear in this case, since so much of what Rukeyser points out in this book is still relevant today.

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## secondwomn says

Overall I enjoyed Rukeyser's conversational, confessional, impassioned writing about poetry. She's not afraid to make big pronouncements such as: "Many of our poems are... monuments. They offer the truths of outrage and the truths of possibility" (66) and "Punctuation is biological" (117) and "If there were no poetry on any day in the world, poetry would be invented that day" (159).

I thoroughly enjoyed the first two sections of the book, titled "Resistances" and "Backgrounds and Sources," which dealt respectively with the places of poetry in society - specifically a society that wages wars - and with critical analysis of Melville and Whitman. The book was published in 1949, and Rukeyser is understandably obsessed with the concepts of war and peace. Imagination, the arts, poetry, seem to be her refuge and solution to the problem of peace as not merely the absence of war, but as stillness and completeness. (A theme she returns to in the closing chapters of the work.) The works of Melville and Whitman specifically illuminate for her the interplay of good and evil and the ways in which they cannot and should not be separated in human thought.

Section three, on the "uses" of poetry, completely broke down for me. Rukeyser discusses other art forms - touching on plays, music, and dance, but focusing the bulk of her attention on film, an industry in which she worked as an editor. The material here felt dated in a way that her opinions on society, art, and war do not; and perhaps the very contemporariness of her other statements creates a greater gulf to overcome. I could happily have skipped this entire chunk of book and not really missed much aside from a historical perspective.

The final section reiterates much of the material before it, but significantly (finally!) adds a definition of poetry. I was surprised that it took 169 pages to reach, but I did find her definition resonate and flexible. "A poem is an imaginary work, living in time, indicated in language. It is and it expresses; it allows us to express. The fact that it extends in time means that motion is internal to the poem." This seems to sum up nicely some of the base components that everyone could agree upon ("language" and expressiveness) and adds what has always seemed to me to be a necessary factor in creating a poem, the concept of "motion" within the work.

Rukeyser also melds the concepts of science and poetry in this section, a pairing that intrigues me as well. She recognizes what has become a better-known concept 50+ years later, that theoretical science and mathematics share much of the same intangible qualities as poetry, that the theoretical thinker is kin to the poet.

Ultimately, what Rukeyser believes in is in "the unity of the imagination" (163) - a concept she applies universally to science, religion, society, and poetry. Her perspective is a hopeful and optimistic one, and one that still seems somehow attainable and yet only in some future time. She strangely attacks poets who treat the poem as an object (I've yet to entirely figure out what she means by that, except perhaps that she refers to poems that deal more with concrete imagery, whose emotional landscape is merely implied or must be entirely supplied by the reader). She rejects those who "sell out" by not exploring "relationships" and "possibility" (208). I find myself sympathizing with her ideals, although I am put off by her narrow attitude towards who she seems to consider a 'real' poet.

Despite agreeing with many of Rukeyser's ideas and genuinely liking her authorial voice, I was not equally interested in all parts of the book. Her dated discussions of early 20th century art, film especially, did not engage me, and I found her dismissals of other poets as sell outs troubling. Additionally, the entire work takes as its foundation the idea that everyone should be invested in poetry (although she acknowledges from the get-go that there is a "hatred to poetry" (9), it does not seem to inform her conclusions or attitudes), which lends it a quality of perhaps preaching to the choir -- I'm not entirely sure that a book which takes nearly its entire length to arrive at a definition of poetry will appeal to or be read by anyone who is not already a poet. However, I find her definition of poetry wonderfully expansive, able to encompass multiple forms and highlighting elements that I do not think poetry should do without. Her idealism, particularly following her experiences with wars and social injustices, moves me and I am particularly touched by her discussions of unity and peace. Rukeyser is at her best when tackling big concepts with her uplifting sense of

possibility.

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### **Paula says**

I am fascinated by Rukeyser's personal story & her engagement with history. Although her thinking in these essays is sometimes fuzzy & her use of abstractions, such as truth, reality, imagination, consciousness & even language, is often contradictory (she says one thing & then, shortly thereafter, seems to say its opposite), she repeatedly won me over when her poet's voice sneaks into her prose. For example, when she characterizes Emily Dickinson's style as one of a "slang of strictness" or when she talks about poetry as a "transfer of human energy." I loved Chapter Twelve, "Out of Childhood," which is composed of impressionistic vignettes (film stills) that summarize & encapsulate the author's childhood & coming to maturity, both as a person & a writer. Compressed, evocative & vastly informative in their succinctness. Worth the price of the book.

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### **Heather says**

Rukeyser's arguments for the significance of poetry are full of detours and asides, which can make this a difficult read. Much of her views on poetry's possibilities are very closely tied to her interest in the sciences, which can be distracting (although her criticisms of the rigidity of method that emerges in science and the humanities resonates). The detours and asides, though, are often quite wonderful, as are her conclusions about the reader not just as audience, but *witness*, and the poem as a constant/constrained striving towards humanity.

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### **Paris Press says**

<http://www.parispress.org/shop/the-li...>

The Life of Poetry is an interdisciplinary book that explores American culture. This collection of essays addresses Americans' fear of feeling and how that fear contributes to the devaluation of the arts, especially poetry, in the United States. Through discussions of history, science, film, literature, mathematics, the visual arts, dance, theater, and politics, Rukeyser speaks to Americans who are intimidated or bored by poetry; she also speaks to those who love it. At the center of this book is Rukeyser's belief that a culture is more compassionate and humane when it embraces, uses, and lives with poetry and the arts.

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### **Hugh Martin says**

Wow. I'm going to use so much in here when I have to defend poetry and why it matters. "Why is it feared?" Rukeyser asks. "It demands full consciousness..."

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## Tamara Agha-Jaffar says

The Life of Poetry by Muriel Rukeyser is an exploration of poetry-its relationship to the visual and performing arts, its role in our personal lives and in the life of our culture.

Rukeyser begins her exploration by discussing the fear of poetry, a fear she attributes to all imaginative work for its ability to invite a total response reached through emotions. Convinced of the transformative power of poetry, Rukeyser argues the impact of poetry and the arts is to make us more compassionate and humane, linking us to our common humanity. She cites various poems, exploring the impact of and similarities between poetry and works in the visual and performing arts. Her vision is expansive.

Rukeyser peppers her discussion with references to poets, authors, philosophers, and scientists. She draws on events from her personal life and from her interactions with others. She argues all aspects of our culture are integrated, the only barriers being those that are artificially created. She promotes the view that even science and poetry are integrated-one bleeds into the other.

The originality of her thought is impressive. First published in 1949, so much of what she says is still relevant. But there were times when it was difficult to follow her train of thinking. The organization was choppy. She seemed to jump from one thought to another, from one reference to another, without making clear the connections or transitions. Perhaps this is reflective of so many thoughts and images and ideas bombarding her mind simultaneously that even though the connections are obvious to her, she is unable to communicate them adequately to the reader. In spite of some of these drawbacks, however, the work contained passages that were lucid, quotable, and truly inspirational.

Rukeyser defines the poem as "an exchange of energy," as "process," as one part of a dynamic triadic relationship between the poet and the reader. She redefines the reader as a "witness," since the term ". . ." includes the act of seeing or knowing by personal experience, as well as the act of giving evidence." Her final chapters are particularly compelling. In language breathless with anticipation, she retraces her experience with the images and thoughts that went into the process of writing a poem. And bordering on lyricism is the chapter containing fleeting images of her childhood memories.

There are many quotable and inspiring passages in the work, including this passage that is perhaps one of the most salient:

*The tendency of art and religion, and the tendency of poetic meaning, is toward the most human. It is a further humanity we are trying to achieve, at our most conscious, and to communicate.*

*The thinning out of our response is the weakness that leads to mechanical aggression. It is the weakness turning us inward to devour our own humanity, and outward only to sell and kill nature and each other.*

Words to savor. Words to remember. Words to live by.

Recommended.

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## Jennifer says

if one can relax, stepping back to view the greater image of the poet, one may begin to become a poet

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### **Daniel Klawitter says**

"Anyone dealing with poetry and the love of poetry must deal, then, with the hatred of poetry, and perhaps even more with the indifference...If you ask your friends about it, you will find that there are a few answers, repeated by everyone. One is that the friend has not the time for poetry. This is a curious choice, since poetry, of all the arts that live in time--music, theater, film, writing--is the briefest, the most compact."

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### **Liza says**

When I was 15 I started reading this in the bathtub and stayed in there until I got pruneey and the water turned cold and then slowly drained out, and I really felt that she had the right idea about the anti-touch people and the anti-poetry people and how they ruin everything and the fear of poetry is the fear. The ideology didn't hold up very well, and I hold that against this book, maybe unfairly.

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### **Carol says**

I am so glad I read this. This book was published in 1949, and in response to what she was saying, advocating, complaining about, at that time made me fervently wish I could have had conversations with her during the 1960's & 1970's as so much of what bothered her was dramatically evolving. I sat talking out loud to this book. I like her concept of, in my words, her concept of the whole. Nothing is separated, everything is integrated. She decided to refer to readers as witnesses instead of readers. Even though she explains that eventually I couldn't really concur. Many conversations to be had about her ideas. Not all of her essays, in the way she organizes her writing are understandable, at least to me.

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### **Ken says**

This is one of those serious books that I read quickly -- not a good combination. And I suppose, given the many 5-stars, it shows just how shallow I am when it comes to poetry. Yep. Kept thinking it was like a textbook. Or criticism. Rough, meet sailing. But I DID love her brief chapter toward the end -- the one with childhood memories written in a poetic way. Rukeyser takes her poetry straight up and on the rocks. Seriously. Alas, more seriously than I do....

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### **Tara Meissner says**

So much to love! One to savor.  
A book to own to read over and over.  
Great joy in this book.

