



City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara

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The first biography of Frank O'Hara--a poet who was at the very center of New York literary and artistic life during the 1950s and 60s. Gooch presents an unforgettable story of a man who was struck down at the height of his powers. 55 photos.

City Poet: The Life and Times of Frank O'Hara Details

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Brandon says

Biographies being what they are its hard to avoid a certain dishy, gossipy tendency, and even more so when the subject is one of the world-champion gossips. That gossipy tone became more pronounced toward the end of the book, but the middle section is actually pretty detailed in terms of sourcing the poems and showing how O'Hara worked. Worth the time if you're a serious Frank freak.

Mauberley says

'I do this I do that'. Like its subject, the book is gossipy and insightful. While I can't yet say how much reading this biography has increased or lessened my admiration for O'Hara, I certainly feel as if I know him better. O'Hara's milieu is well drawn - post-war New York, second generation Ab Ex and the Pop rebellion that ultimately overthrew it are captured in portraits that deftly render the vitality of its participants. It is a world with an insatiable appetite for all forms of art and O'Hara throws himself headfirst into it. (I wonder how seriously he is taken today as an art critic.) His love affairs are portrayed in all of their passionate confusion - 'eroticization of the oppressor'. Gooch is better in locating the sources of many instances in O'Hara's poetry than in interpreting it, however, I now understand that the poetry that I like best is the work that commences with 'To James Dean'. As a measure of shifting social attitudes, it is amazing to hear participants interviewed in the late 80's/ early 90's discussing with candour and openness that for which they would have been arrested less than 40 years earlier.

Maria says

Maybe 5 stars is more to Frank O'Hara than to Brad Gooch. He wrote a very moving book though, and it read almost like a novel. Very enlightening, wistfulness-inducing, really a perfect biography (of O'Hara as well as of the New York art/poetry scene in 50s-60s).

Salvatore says

A biography that makes me want to return to all O'Hara's poems to see what I missed the first few times. A biography that makes this pilf prove there was a lot of baggage attached to him the poems do not suggest (Catholicism and self-image issues as causes). A biography that respects but does not canonize its subject, especially on the topic of his lovers and open gay love poetry, which according to this biographer is more incidental than purposeful or political or radical (maybe the best kind of reason?). A biography that name drops and makes O'Hara's end seem inevitable (ugh!) but does a fine job evoking an O'Hara world. I would have liked to have seen one of his curated MoMA exhibits.

Robert says

Frank O'Hara was an almost savant-level talent: a whipsmart, intense, deeply flawed, fascinating bon vivant—and a real piece of work, as it turns out. This exhaustively detailed biography is elegantly, skillfully written—always interesting and evocative. The circle of legendary friends O'Hara surrounded himself with (William DeKooning! Diane DiPrima! Alan Ginsberg!) is remarkable in itself, yet O'Hara is one of those individuals who contained multitudes, a subject deserving of a biography if ever there was one. And those poems he wrote! There's a lot of them to be found in here, but not my favorite, a 1950 work called "Animals." I'll post it right here and now, it's so great:

Have you forgotten what we were like then
when we were still first rate
and the day came fat with an apple in its mouth

it's no use worrying about Time
but we did have a few tricks up our sleeves
and turned some sharp corners

the whole pasture looked like our meal
we didn't need speedometers
we could manage cocktails out of ice and water

I wouldn't want to be faster
or greener than now if you were with me O you
were the best of all my days

Anyway, if you like Frank O'Hara & want to know more about him, this is a fine book, indeed.

stevenallenmay says

Seems to be the first serious biography of the poet and his circle of friends. Imperfect. It's a great beginning point, would work if one were to reading the poems while also reading the biography.

Then again, I am not a die-hard O'Hara fan.

Tom says

It's safe to say I'm on a major Frank O'Hara kick, and I preferred this to Joe LeSueur's memoir, although I don't think it beats Gooch's biography of Flannery O'Connor. Regardless, better understanding O'Hara's work in the context of his life should only make reading his poems that much more enjoyable.

David Marans says

Although I am unable to appreciate Abstract Surrealism, including most of the poems (and artwork) featured in this biography, I thought the book was excellent. And I was delighted to finally "meet" the wonder that was Frank O'Hara. His ridiculously premature death was a tremendous loss, wish I could have seen this kinetic, way ahead of his time wonder.

Kevin says

As with any biography, there is a struggle between exhaustive details and some sort of narrative drive. This book has a few chapters where it seems to be endless lists of who Frank knew, who he slept with, and who invited him for a weekend in the Hamptons, but it also has really great chapters looking at how the person he was sleeping with inspired him to write this amazing series of poems or that one seminal gorgeous piece. Gooch clearly seems to have spoken with every single person who ever knew Frank and who is still alive, and to have gone through any writing he could find by or about him. The fact that he's able to distill all of this research into such a readable book is amazing. And the poetry shines through. There are ample examples from longer poems and many of the shorter poems are presented in their entirety.

Alejandro says

A really readable and fascinating account of Frank O'Hara's life.

Dona says

Received this book from friend Phyllis years ago and never read it until this month. Gooch's biography of poet and Museum of Modern Art curator Frank O'Hara is informative and well-researched and documented. Gooch also incorporates many excerpts from O'Hara's poetry to show how the poet's experiences were inspiring his art. Although O'Hara is considered part of the New York School of poets and artists (including painter Jackson Pollock and poet Kenneth Koch), he collaborated and brushed hands with artists from the Beats and Black Mountain School, just to name a few. I had no idea how many notable artists, painters, filmmakers, sculptors, musicians and writers were revolving around each other during O'Hara's time: from Ginsberg to Warhol to Anita Pallenberg to John Ashberry to Franz Kline. I found myself googling names every few pages or so to find out more about individuals of whom I have only cursory knowledge.

The writers' style was just right for my taste--conversational enough to keep things interesting and matter of fact enough to describe the over-the-top lives and activities of 1950's and '60's artists in a non-dramatic, sometimes humorous way. Here's one description of a Warhol/O'Hara encounter: "Jim Brody, a poet from O'Hara's New School class, recalls a cocktail party at O'Hara's at which Warhol gave O'Hara an imaginary drawing of the poet's penis, which he crumpled up and threw away in annoyance."

Whether you like his poetry or not, O'Hara was a fascinating, acerbic, charismatic and ultimately tragically alcoholic figure who left an indelible impression on everyone he met.

Catherine Meng says

Sometimes the dissatisfaction which leads one to put something away for a few weeks and look at it later is not that the work is unfinished, but the inspiration is unfinished. You look at it later and realize that it is complete, and meanwhile the dissatisfaction has disappeared because it was part of the occasion rather than real critical response.

-Frank O'Hara

Ben Shear says

5 stars for frank ohara 4 stars for brad gooch's bio of frank ohara. well worth the read. I hesitate to say unflinching bc there were parts where i flinched, but does paint a seemingly unbiased portrait of oharas life. and made me really wanna peek at nyc 50's art world for a week or so. don't know if i could handle much more. i would recommend to anybody who even kindve likes frank ohara

David Rullo says

An overview of O'Hara's life that pays respect to his poetry but never examines either with a critical eye. Much like O'Hara's "I do this, I do that" poetry, Gooch's biography is filled with a lot of what O'Hara did, with whom he lived, where he worked, etc. It never delves too deeply though into his relationships, never attempts to explain, conclude or surmise.

O'Hara's poetry is often referenced, rather, snippets of O'Hara's poetry is referenced. If you are new to the poet you get no sense for his rhythm or style. You derive no sense of the larger themes in any of his poems.

That said, the book does give a good summary of his love life, his work at MOMA, his friendships and his death. If nothing else the book can be recommended for the last chapter which focuses on O'Hara's death. Unfortunately though, that's where the book ends with nary a mention of his legacy or impact on the world of modern poetry.

Charles says

There's a lot of information in the book, which is useful, but it all feels so shallowly done. It might serve as a useful tool though for the real biography of O'Hara, which still waits to be written.
