



## The Best of It: New and Selected Poems

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Kay Ryan, named the **Pulitzer Prize Winner for Poetry 2010**, is just the latest in an amazing array of accolades for this wonderfully accessible, widely loved poet. She was appointed the Library of Congress's sixteenth poet laureate from 2008 to 2010. Salon has compared her poems to "Fabergé eggs, tiny, ingenious devices that inevitably conceal some hidden wonder." The two hundred poems in Ryan's *The Best of It* offer a stunning retrospective of her work, as well as a swath of never-before-published poems of which are sure to appeal equally to longtime fans and general readers.

## The Best of It: New and Selected Poems Details

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# From Reader Review *The Best of It: New and Selected Poems* for online ebook

## James Murphy says

I was steered toward reading Kay Ryan by a critical appraisal comparing her to Dickinson. I think the comparison fitting. Ryan's poems, too, are short, stabbing darts which are deceptively simple and easy. The brevity of her form helps to create the deception, but held within the rind of that simple form is a denser, meatier thought. The reader's task, as with all poetry, is to peel away the rind to get at the pulp within. Each of the poems in *The Best of It*, like Dickinson's poems, is a radiance. They take as their subjects the everyday and the common. Simple, basic titles like "Cloud" and "Coming and Going" and "How Birds Sing" head each page like branches from which is hung ripe and philosophical fruit. They're difficult and opaque but Ryan isn't as Delphic as Dickinson. She tells it slant just as Dickinson famously did--in fact, a poem here carries that title, "Slant"--but she's sleek and streamlined for our times, and I think that the elegance and nimbleness of her expression and rhyming helps to illuminate her work. Sometimes a Ryan poem will light its own way, will throw a beacon to guide the reader. This was my first experience with Ryan. Now I want to read the rest of it.

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## s.penkevich says

*The Best of It* collects new and selected poems from sixteenth US Poet Laureate Kay Ryan's career covering 1993-2005. A highly decorated poet, Ryan teaches English at the College of Marin in California (her partner Carol Adair also taught there until her death in 2009) and has released eight collections of poetry. Ryan write tight little poems teeming with figurative language and marching to a rhythmic beat to emphasize her rhyme schemes that marries the traditional poetry styles of old with modern poetry.

### **The Edges of Time**

*It is at the edges  
that time thins.  
Time which had been  
dense and viscous  
as amber suspending  
intentions like bees  
unseizes them. A  
humming begins,  
apparently coming  
from stacks of  
put-off things or  
just in back. A  
racket of claims now,  
as time flattens. A  
glittering fan of things  
competing to happen,  
brilliant and urgent  
as fish when seas*

*retreat.*

Ryan often takes a small, specific idea or moment, and unlocks a quick insight, offering a surprising amount of depth from such a small idea and in such small paper space. While her poems rarely exceed a few short lines, they are filled with poetic devices and charge forward to the rhythmic quality of her words. She fuses her techniques together so well that it is difficult to tell which device was the ultimate goal for the poem, all of them working together in unison to create a brief immaculate image. This rhythm, often iambic, gives the poetry an older feel to it, and allows her to construct interesting rhyme structures. Many of her rhymes are interior rhymes that are brought out and highlighted by the rhythm of her words.

### **Atlas**

*Extreme exertion  
isolates a person  
from help,  
discovered Atlas.  
Once a certain  
shoulder-to-burden  
ratio collapses,  
there is so little  
others can do:  
they can't  
lend a hand  
with Brazil  
and not stand  
on Peru.*

I must admit, however, that the rhythm and rhymes of her poetry is my greatest complain with it. It is cute and fun at times, but it is often too much. The rhyming to her poems is like eating a piece of cake with frosting so rich that you cannot take more than a few bites without feeling sick. Much of her poetry is playful and witty, while always retaining an overall seriousness to the poem, yet the playfulness did not charm me the way it does with, say, Billy Collins. I hate to say it, but reading this reminded me of why I love Collins and I felt that Ryan pales in comparison. However, that is not a fair comparison to make, as both poets have radically different styles and goals, but all in all I prefer Collins. There were some very touching poems in here, and several that did grab me. For example, I loved her poem on Hide & Seek, which really reminded me of my 2 year old daughter and her current 'hiding method' of standing in the middle of the room with a blanket over her head yelling 'Where Tilly go?!':

### **Hide & Seek**

*It's hard not  
to jump out  
instead of  
waiting to be  
found. It's  
hard to be  
alone so long  
and then hear  
someone come  
around. It's  
like some form  
of skin's developed*

*in the air  
that, rather  
than have torn,  
you tear.*

Ryan does take a fun look at poetry as an art form and often uses it as a commentary on other poets. A good quarter of the poems contained in this collection begin with the quote to which they are either inspired by, or in response to. Marianne Moore, Annie Dillard, and Joseph Brodsky are the most common writers spoken to through poetry, and there are several poems based on facts from Ripely's *Believe It Or Not!*, such as her poem on stage productions or her poem about Matrigupta (Matrigupta wrote a poem that so pleased Rajah Vicraama Ditya that he was given the state of Kashmir for his efforts, which he ruled from 118-123 until abdicating to become a recluse). She even dedicates a poem to W.G. Sebald:

**He Lit a Fire With Icicles**

*This was the work  
of St. Sebolt, one  
of his miracles:  
he lit a fire with  
icicles. He struck  
them like a steel  
to flint, did St.  
Sebolt. It  
makes sense  
only at a certain  
body heat. How  
cold he had  
to get to learn  
that ice would  
burn. How cold  
he had to stay.  
When he could  
feel his feet  
he had to  
back away.*

Her commentary on language, translation and poetry in general are some of the best aspects of this collection.

**Poetry is a Kind of Money**

*Poetry is a kind of money  
whose value depends upon reserves.  
It's not the paper it's written on  
or its self-announced denomination,  
but the bullion, sweated from the earth  
and hidden, which preserves its worth.  
Nobody knows how this works,  
and how can it? Why does something  
stacked in some secret bank or cabinet,  
some miser's trove, far back, lambent,  
and gloated over by its golem, make us*

*so solemnly convinced of the transaction  
when Mandelstam says love, even  
in translation?*

As a sort of 'best of', this collection left me a bit underwhelmed. There were some wonderful and touching poems, but much did not particularly grab me. I can see why many people would really enjoy her poetry, and reading a bit about her life reveals an impressive woman with a wonderful mind, but this just felt a bit flat for me. I did enjoy her method of blending the traditional with the modern, and the way her poem often spoke to the title, either allowing the title to be the actual first lines, or to posit an idea that the poem would then look up to the top of the page at and deconstruct. It was the rhyming and overly bouncy rhythm that wore thin on me, which happened in far too many poems. Which may be a point of personal pretention as I don't mind rhyming in older poems, but in these it just felt, well, cheesy and often times forced. It occasionally played out in my head like corny rap lyrics that would be sung over preset Casio beats. This is still a great collection to sample however, and if you enjoy rhyming poetry you might end up adoring Kay Ryan. She is deserving of praise.

**3/5**

### **Failure**

*Like slime  
inside a  
stagnant tank*

*its green  
deepening  
from lime  
to emerald*

*a dank  
but less  
ephemeral  
efflorescence*

*than success  
is in general.*

### **The Best of It**

*However carved up  
or pared down we get,  
we keep on making  
the best of it as though  
it doesn't matter that  
our acre's down to  
a square foot. As  
though our garden  
could be one bean  
and we'd rejoice if  
it flourishes, as  
though one bean*

*could nourish us.*

### **Among English Verbs**

*Among English verbs,  
"to die" is oddest in its  
eagerness to be "dead",  
immodest in its  
haste to be told-  
a verb alchemical  
in the head:  
one speck of its gold  
and a whole life's lead.*

### **Green Hills**

*Their green flanks  
and swells are not  
flesh in any sense  
matching ours,  
we tell ourselves.  
Nor their green  
breast nor their  
green shoulder nor  
the languor of their  
rolling over.*

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### **Mike Jensen says**

Is this worth reading? Well over 90% of these poems are not. There is nothing breathtaking in the language, and few of these poems have a governing idea that seems profound enough to write a poem about. I am baffled by her popularity and the high rating others have given this book. There are occasional poems, perhaps eight in this collection, which the author considers her best work, which express something in a very nice way. These were good enough that I make myself slog through the rest hoping for more. I guess it was worth it, but barely. Not to my taste, clearly.

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### **Mike Lindgren says**

The poems in Kay Ryan's astonishing collection "The Best of It: New and Selected Poems" are so crisp and immediate that they seem effortless. It is only upon closer inspection that these little miracles of compression begin to give up their secrets, their engaging surfaces gradually yielding ever more layers of nuance.

Ryan's verse reminds one not so much of conventional narrative poems as of some cunningly made artifacts, like those tiny Russian nesting dolls, or an exquisite enameled box that, unsprung, yields an interior vista of

startling clarity.

"The Best of It" collects four previous volumes, going back to 1994, and adds 24 new poems. The trajectory of a poet's career in this country, today, does not usually conform to a smooth, triumphalist incline, so it is satisfying to know that Kay Ryan is serving as the U.S. Poet Laureate -- a kind of ambassador for the art.

Taken as a whole, "The Best of It" displays an astounding consistency of tone and quality, with the later work and the new poems perhaps shading a bit toward an elegant midcareer austerity.

One of the many charms here is accessibility: the poems tend toward the bite-size (only a few spill over onto a second page), and their initial effect is of a pleasing briskness, free of the dense opacity and deliberate "difficulty" that makes so much contemporary poetry into the readerly equivalent of a trip to the dentist.

Ryan crafts startling rhymes ("hibiscus / to kiss," and "cracked / exact") and jittery rhythms that often stop short or feature a stress falling on an unexpected syllable, with a sideways hop. They are little exploders of cliché: "A bitter pill doesn't need to be swallowed to work," begins one, while waiting for "The Other Shoe" to drop wouldn't be so bad "if the undropped / didn't congregate / with the undropped . . . acquiring density / and weight."

This is not to say that Ryan's poems are glib or facile; on the contrary, they often address abstractions and proclaim paradoxes with vigor, as in "Forgetting": "Forgetting takes space. Forgotten matters displace / as much anything else as / anything else." For all their colloquial style and down-home wit, Ryan's poems tend to circle deeply philosophical issues. "Whatever is done," states one, "leaves a hole in the / possible." Ryan's words mirror her mind, in the sense that both are quick and idiosyncratic, likely to land on the unlikely but inspired thought.

These gifts call to mind some illustrious predecessors, including Emily Dickinson, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore and Robert Frost. Despite the echoes, though, Ryan is so arresting and genuinely original that her book stays in the mind in a way unlike much contemporary poetry, so often impenetrable and self-absorbed. In today's world of exploding self-expression and relentless ephemera, Kay Ryan sticks.

FROM THE CLEVELAND PLAIN DEALER, April 13, 2010.

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## **Dale Harcombe says**

Despite winning the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 2010 and being the United States Poet Laureate 2008-2010, this poet was unfamiliar to me as my knowledge of American poetry is not extensive. I was excited to discover her work and looked forward to delving into this collection of poems chosen by her as representative of her earlier and later poems. The book contains over 200 poems. That alone makes it worth investing time in.

I particularly liked *Virga*. In this poem I liked the use of internal rhyme throughout. Others I liked included:

*The Edges of Time*

*Polish and Balm*

*Retroactive*

*Shift*

*Spiderweb*

*Patience*



*Tune*

*Things Shouldn't Be So Hard*

*Stardust*

*Thin*

*Chop*

I liked the way the poet often started with an object and let thoughts and ideas fan out from it. In some poems I found the rhymes a little intrusive but that was the exception rather than the rule. At first read I wasn't as impressed as I had expected to be given the status of this poet, but in re-read the poems crept upon me and pulled me in. This is an enjoyable and polished collection I am sure I will return to.

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## **Jesse says**

Along with Anne Carson, Kay Ryan has long been my favorite contemporary poet, so I was pleased to see her become our Poet Laureate a few years back, and then delighted to attend a reading and lecture last year, which is where I picked up this collection. She signed it "for Jesse from the San Joaquin," as I had asked her where exactly she had grown up, and the location turned out to be as small and unknown as my own hometown (though only about 45 minutes apart, neither of us had heard of the other, something which is not surprising). As for now, we're both Central Valley expats settled in the Bay Area.

I've often seen Ryan's poems described as fine cut diamonds, and I won't bother trying to come up with a better description—each are remarkably compact (about the length of a typical stanza), constructed with a dazzling precision and conciseness, and sparkle endlessly with wit and insight. I revisit this often with much pleasure.

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## **Jennifer says**

Lets face it, poetry is the wheat grass juice of literature. Everyone says that it's great for you (and it is) but it smells like your lawn and tastes like gritty pond scum.

When someone wants to look too smart for the room, poetry is the stick they beat you with. When someone wants to show how dramatic, artsy and depressed they are, it's the prop of choice. Emo kids love it. As do the elderly.

For me, poetry was in the same catagory as the advanced Maths: I know they exist and I'm sure someone else is taking care of it.

Kay Ryan's work is not something I read to impress anyone or to make myself feel smarter. I read an essay on her work and it made want to try it. I fully expected to skim or quit after four or five pages. I surprised myself.

It took some adjustments on my part. Normally, I read quickly, but I kept getting lost and tangled up. My brain couldn't get the beats right in the rhyme scheme. So, I read the poems outloud and slowly. It's not like

any other reading I've done.

I've seen some of the Goodreads reviews of this book and some people (who are much more familiar and literate with poetry) have complained that the collection isn't deep or revelatory or whatever. They may be right, I'm not qualified to answer that. I just know that many of them made me laugh or think or feel a little sad.

So I'm now one of those annoying people that could, if they wanted to, discuss poetry. I guess stranger things have happened; although I bet it's a pretty short list.

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### **Heather Hasselle says**

I ate these poems in a night. They're small and contain a satisfying crunch, like cereal. With every spoonful of a poem, you'll crave more. When at the end, you've consumed them all, pour yourself another bowl and do it all over again.

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### **Sarah says**

In my bookcase for a few years - the bookcase closest to my bed. A collection I keep returning to.

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### **Jee Koh says**

Smart, inventive, observant, the poems of Kay Ryan are a genuine delight. The lesser poems in this New and Selected are the fallouts of her strengths. When the love for epigram trumps the fire of imagination. When the final rhyming pair clicks shut but the box is empty. "Things Shouldn't Be So Hard" affords a rare glimpse into the private life. It leaves me wanting more, not for the sake of voyeurism, but for the sake of the complete victory.

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### **Joan Winnek says**

I'm going to return this book to the library, then request it again. A list of poems I especially like: Shift, Spiderweb, Leaving Spaces, Force, Persiflage, Caught. And here is a short poem that exemplifies what I like about Kay Ryan.

EMPTINESS

Emptiness cannot be  
compressed. Nor can it  
fight abuse. Nor is there  
an endless West hosting  
elk, antelope, and the  
tough cayuse. This is  
true also of the mind:  
it can get used.

3/31/12

I love this book so much that it's hard to mark it read, as I'm sure it will stay on my reading table for me to dip into time and time again. So many of the poems have personal meaning for me. I have read one at a time when it directly informed my inner life--more than once.

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### **Roxanne Russell says**

It's her politeness  
one loathes: how she  
isn't insistent, how  
she won't impose, how  
nothing's so urgent  
it won't wait. Like  
a meek guest you tolerate  
she goes her way--the muse  
you'd have leap at your throat,  
you'd spring to obey.

Kay Ryan really knocks me out. Even with a conscious effort to show some restraint, I flagged 18 poems in this collection. Every poem is a tiny little juggernaut of language mastery and universal insight. She never uses first person, yet these poems can be intensely personal. Her entry points and tricky exits taught me more about composition than all the years I taught ENG 101.

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### **William Lawrence says**

Not sure about this United States Poet Laureate, MacArthur Fellow, and Pulitzer Prize winning poet's other works, but this collection is a throw away. Honestly, it's almost unreadable. I seldom bother to write poetry reviews because most collections have something special to them, regardless of content, style, or form. But there are award-winning, widely published, widely sold books like this one that bother (and puzzle) me. The short two to three word lines have no rhythm or reason. Ryan might as well have placed one word per line for 300 pages. Maybe I ought to construct one or two word lines for pages and pages in my next collection!

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### **Miriam says**

*A life should leave*

*deep tracks:  
ruts where she  
went out and back  
to get the mail  
or move the hose  
around the yard;  
where she used to  
stand before the sink,  
a worn-out place;  
beneath her hand  
the china knobs  
rubbed down to  
white pastilles;  
the switch she  
used to feel for  
in the dark  
almost erased.  
Her things should  
keep her marks.  
The passage  
of a life should show;  
it should abrade.  
And when life stops,  
a certain space—  
however small—  
should be left scarred  
by the grand and  
damaging parade.  
Things shouldn't  
be so hard.*

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## **Chiuho says**

This is the one of book I enjoyed the most in my recent poetry marathon.  
on the review of the cover stated that great poetry inspire us with the music of language and force of wisdom.  
I felt that about this collection.

### **Losses**

Most losses add something -  
a new socket or silence,  
a gap in a personal  
archipelago od islands.

We have that difference  
to visit - itself  
a going -on of sorts.

But there are other losses  
so far beyond report  
that they leave holes  
in holes only

likes the ends of the  
long and lonely lives  
of castaways  
thought dead but not..

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