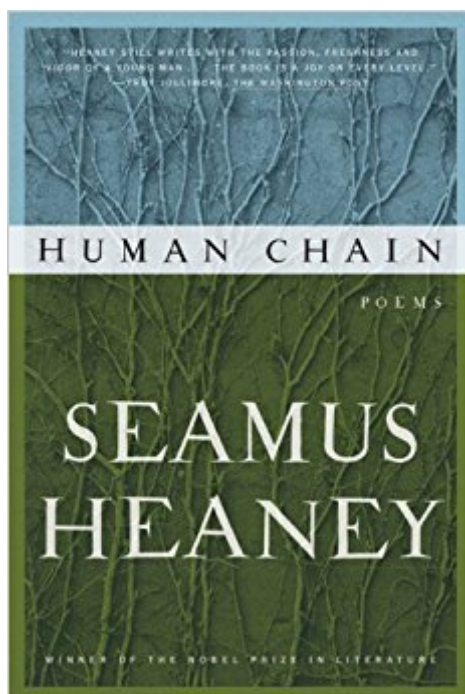


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Human Chain: Poems



Synopsis

A Boston Globe Best Poetry Book of 2011 Winner of the 2011 Griffin Poetry Prize Winner of the 2011 Poetry Now Award Seamus Heaney's new collection elicits continuities and solidarities, between husband and wife, child and parent, then and now, inside an intently remembered present—the stepping stones of the day, the weight and heft of what is passed from hand to hand, lifted and lowered. Human Chain also broaches larger questions of transmission, of lifelines to the inherited past. There are newly minted versions of anonymous early Irish lyrics, poems that stand at the crossroads of oral and written, and other "hermit songs" that weigh equally in their balance the craft of scribe and the poet's early calling as scholar. A remarkable sequence entitled "Route 101" plots the descent into the underworld in the Aeneid against single moments in the arc of a life, from a 1950s childhood to the birth of a first grandchild. Other poems display a Virgilian pietas for the dead—friends, neighbors, family—that is yet wholly and movingly vernacular. Human Chain also includes a poetic "herbal" adapted from the Breton poet Guillevic—lyrics as delicate as ferns, which puzzle briefly over the world of things and landscapes that exclude human speech, while affirming the interconnectedness of phenomena, as of a self-sufficiency in which we too are included

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Customer Reviews

I'm not even going to think about calling this a review of Seamus Heaney's latest collection of poems, Human Chain.. It would be incredibly presumptuous on my part to even suggest that I'm going to "evaluate" his work (of course, normally I'm always presumptuous in terms of reviewing!). Instead, I'm going to just relay a few points that I love about this amazing poet, and why you should

read him if you haven't already. For one thing, his writing style is so straightforward and concise. It's not fluffy or ostentatious or full of bizarre allusions that make you feel ignorant for not understanding. Instead, he writes like a reader, with spare words that draw crisp pictures. Yet his poetry does have layers...you can find multiple meanings if you ponder what he says, so they still have depth and are certainly not simplistic at all. In fact, in many ways his simplicity is deceiving. For example, I recently re-read "Digging", a poem he wrote in 1968 about a man admiring his father's and grandfather's strength as they turned over turf and worked the land in Ireland. He concludes the poem with something along the lines (I'm paraphrasing) that 'I'll have to do the work with my pen'. What initially is a pleasant enough little story (hard work, family, nature) suddenly had a deeper meaning and then, "digging" into it, one could see he was commenting on the struggles of Northern Ireland and showing the violence that was sometimes used to create change in the Republic. He never got pushy or overtly political but you could clearly see that he was sending another message. So, in reading Human Chain, I was again dazzled by his subtlety.

If you know Seamus Heaney, this collection, with its gentle surface concealing tense depths, will probably not surprise you. I mean that in the best possible way. Heaney's approach to observation, noting ekphrastic detail that reveals a core of loss and grief, serves him so well because it tells his story while touching our spirits. We treasure existence, as Heaney, because it ends. Consider these lines from "A Herbal": Between heather and marigold, Between sphagnum and buttercup, Between dandelion and broom, Between forget-me-not and honeysuckle, As between clear blue and cloud, Between haystack and sunset sky, Between oak tree and slated roof, I had my existence. I was there. Me in place and the place in me. This is a man coming to terms. Notice the past tense. Throughout the book, there's a sense of wistfulness, of realization that what now exists cannot be forever, and that all life's good gifts must end. Poems like "Uncoupled," "Canopy," and "Route 110" bespeak a man looking backward across the span of years. But he's not merely melancholy. There's also an innate maturity. "The Conway Stewart," about a fountain pen, feels like a deliberate reference to "Digging," the first poem in his first collection (and now the first poem in Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996). That one had the false bravado of Heaney holding a pen "snug as a gun." This new poem feels like recognition that such swaggering machismo doesn't date well; now a pen is a pen, and a poet's connection to the world. And we even get a sense of Heaney looking forward.

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