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Opened Ground: Selected Poems, 1966-1996



Synopsis

As selected by the author, *Opened Ground* includes the essential work from Heaney's twelve previous books of poetry, as well as new sequences drawn from two of his landmark translations, *The Cure at Troy* and *Sweeney Astray*, and several previously uncollected poems. Heaney's voice is like no other--"by turns mythological and journalistic, rural and sophisticated, reminiscent and impatient, stern and yielding, curt and expansive" (Helen Vendler, *The New Yorker*)--and this is a one-volume testament to the musicality and precision of that voice. The book closes with Heaney's Nobel Lecture: "Crediting Poetry."

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Customer Reviews

Those of you who are already familiar with his poems will be delighted to learn of the publication of *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966-1996*, a bumper crop of Heaney's best work over a thirty year period, and a record of the writer's development from the tentative and introspective poems of *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) to the authoritative and visionary tonalities of middle age in *Seeing Things* (1991) and *The Spirit Level* (1996). This hefty, 440-page volume gathers together a pruned-down version of each of the author's ten volumes of poetry, plus extracts from his verse play, *The Cure at Troy*, his translation of the Irish epic poem, *Sweeney Astray*, and his Nobel Prize lecture, "Crediting Poetry." In 1975, poet Robert Lowell dubbed Heaney "the greatest Irish poet since W.B. Yeats." This volume proves that claim, perhaps too hasty a judgement in 1975, to be fully justified. One of the most appealing aspects of the early poetry is the dense, tactile language used to evoke scenes of nature on the family farm, often conveyed from the point of view of the small child,

and the poems are full of a child's freshness of perception. Farmyard and barnyard, cows, bulls, rats, sheds, wells, rakes, ploughs, and pitchforks appeared in vivid detail in this rural poetic landscape, in which the speaker experienced his solitary epiphanies. Farm workers and rural artisans, including thatchers, ploughmen and even water diviners were transformed into artists in their own right, and as alter egos of the poet himself. In the 1970s, Heaney began to write more directly about the Irish landscape, particularly the marshy bogs, that became emblematic for him of the Irish national consciousness.

In poem after poem, Heaney's words seem... inevitable. He had the Irish gift --- the gift of glib --- but he didn't use words for self-glorification. As someone said, he saw the Nobel Prize (among friends, he spoke of "the N-word") as encouragement to do better. Heaney was that rare event: a great writer, a great man. He taught. He mentored. He praised. He parented. And still did the internal work that led to a book of selected poems that topped 400 pages. "Seamus never had a sour moment, neither in person nor on paper," said the playwright Tom Stoppard. "You couldn't help loving him any more than you could help reading on from the first line." The life, in brief: Born in Northern Ireland, in 1939, the eldest of nine children. (A younger brother, age four, was killed by a car. His poem about the death ends: "Wearing a poppy bruise on the left temple/ He lay in the four foot box as in a cot./ No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked him clear./ A four foot box, a foot for every year.") He won a scholarship to a school that nourished him, earned a college degree in English, taught, married, wrote. In college, he said of his writing, "I was just kicking the ball around the penalty area, not trying to shoot at the goal. Then in 1962 the current began to flow." The Heaney poems you may have seen quoted mostly describe a world as foreign to us as the moon, a rural world of lorries, peat, wells, animals and the heavy tread of the Church. As he describes it in his Nobel Prize speech: "...in rural Co. Derry, we crowded together in the three rooms of a traditional thatched farmstead and lived a kind of den-life which was more or less emotionally and intellectually proofed against the outside world.

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