



Houseboat Days

John Ashbery

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This reissue of a book of thirty-nine poems, first collected in 1977, reminds us of Ashbery's astonishing explorations (to use Donald Barthelme's words) of places where no one has ever been. "Wet Casements," "Syringa," "Loving Mad Tom," and the long "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid,'" which concludes the book, are among the riches in a collection of dazzling eloquence and power.

Houseboat Days Details

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Author : John Ashbery

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Kent says

I pursued this book after a conversation with friends about which Ashbery is best. And though I don't know that the debate is settled in my mind, I will say that the charm and intelligence and elegance of Ashbery is brimming over in *Houseboat Days*. Should I listen to his suggestion, that thinking can obstruct life? I don't know.

Andrew Field says

Thoughts About Ashbery

Ashbery re-describes reality through the ever-changing vivacity of his ideas. His poems are chronicles of what happens when one of the most fertile imaginations of our time creates on the page landscapes of ideas. In order to understand Ashbery, we need to pay attention to the originality of his ideas, the way in which one idea magically and manically (maniacally?) replaces the next, in this every-shifting quicksand dance of cognition, perception, thought, imagination, memory. What he is doing is creating rooms, gardens, cities, fields of imaginative thought. When we enter these rooms, we need to stay alert, even as the enormity of the poet's imaginative garden/city does everything within its power to distract us (almost?) into new forms of attention. ("A poem resists the intelligence / Almost successfully," wrote Stevens.) Reading Ashbery is therefore a dangerous ecstasy, for it propels us into a terrifyingly shifting world of "snapped off" perceptions, and the poem itself is constantly equilibrating itself, even as its chaos turns (in his best works) into something uncanny, lyrical, somehow ordered and somehow new. It is this freshness, this newness of Ashbery's imagination, which functions as a means of moving us as close as possible to revelation, as Ashbery has said somewhere in regards to a hoped-for aim of his poems. This aim – the adventure of imagination that places us, trembling and astonished, on the cusp of revelation – is the greatest gift his poetry affords. That it does so somewhat consistently in his earlier works (I'm still not as enthusiastic about his works following "A Wave," although I need to read more) is arguably nothing short of a poetic miracle.

Steve says

I don't "get" Ashbery. I have no doubt this is a five star collection for many, and there were many lines that left me both baffled and amazed ("The idea of great distance / Is permitted, even implicit in the slow dripping / Of a lute."), but looking back, I cannot connect lines I liked with specific poems. It's all one strange flow of image and word, with poem titles only serving as pauses. There is a vague, dreamlike sense of mood. But after a while, I found myself craving something more concrete, like a parts manual or a telephone book.

Tom says

Well, this is my second attempt with Ashbery. I tried *The Tennis Court Oath* earlier this year and got about

ten pages into it before giving up, so finishing *Houseboat Days* feels like more of an accomplishment than any 88-page book should. But I suppose I just don't get Ashbery. I found almost every last one of these poems inscrutable, which is a shame since there were interesting lines and images throughout. I just couldn't figure out what they add up to.

Wendy Trevino says

Favorites: The Other Tradition, Pyrography, The Explanation, Crazy Weather, Melodic Trains, Wet Casements, Ut Pictura Poesis is Her Name, The Wrong Kind of Insurance, and Valentine

Henry says

Though I couldn't really tell you what most of the poems in this collection mean, I really enjoyed reading most of them. Some of my favorites were "Street Musicians", "Melodic Trains", and "And Ut Pictura Poesis is her name". I kind of like the open ended ness of Ashbery's work, and how you can't figure out what he is saying all of the time, sometimes you just have to read his poems for their beauty. I also really admire his boldness and his refusal to settle in his style. I can't wait to read more of his work, even if it is difficult to read and understand.

Abby says

And Others, Vaguer Presences

Are built out of the meshing of life and space
At the point where we are wholly revealed
In the lozenge-shaped openings. Because
It is argued that these structures address themselves
To exclusively aesthetic concerns, like windmills
On a vast plain. To which it is answered
That there are no other questions than these,
Half squashed in mud, emerging out of the moment
We all live, learning to like it. No sonnet
On this furthest strip of land, no pebbles,

No plants. To extend one's life
All day on the dirty stone of some plaza,
Unaware among the pretty lunging of the wind,
Light and shade, is like coming out of
A coma that is a white, interesting country,
Prepared to lose the main memory in a meeting
By a torchlight under the twisted end of the stairs.

(John Ashbery is on Goodreads? What?)

landon says

Houseboat Days collects some of my favorite Ashbery poems. It was nice to have an excuse to read them in order when I found a third-print edition at Tim's Used Books in Provincetown, MA. I appreciate the shoutout to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin in the long last piece, "Fantasia on 'The Nut-Brown Maid.'" I vacationed there two Christmases ago. And I like some lines that follow the name-drop:

Spiraling like fish,
Toward a distant, unperceived surface, was all
The reflection there was. Somewhere had its opaque
Momentary existence.

The vague, pretty figure shows one of Ashbery's best poetic registers, the casual meditation on time. Nature imagery, as here, often accompanies these meditations. Elsewhere he mixes mathematics with meteorology, household patter with professional jargon. I especially like it when he caricatures classical poetic figures. He uses puns, aural tricks, and Romantic apostrophe in unexpected places. Drawing on formal traditions gives his poems a sense of varied eloquence.

Due to the nature of his style and the magnitude of his talent, it's hard to pick favorites from this collection. "Wet Casements" and "Saying It to Keep It from Happening" have so far held up best to rereading. The closing poem, while hard to do in one sitting, makes for a really profound linguistic experience. It looks like a wild riff on the dialogue format and spills into prose at the end, as if the speakers ("He" and "She" – really a formal device) only find more to express as their conversation goes on. More than a dialogue between speakers, the piece explores poetic forms by elaborating on a quasi-Socratic structure. As Ashbery converses with established tropes, he is also in dialogue with the reader. Which is his ultimate appeal for me: he'll play the wise man then step back and shrug with us.

Stephen says

the best of all his collections

Dale Houstman says

I loved Wallace Stevens growing up, his freshness of phrasing, his esoteric and eccentric vocabulary, the clash of buried yearning, density, color, and the hermetic pronouncements. When I finally fell upon Ashbery (an image he might not relish!), I was "re-thrilled" by many of the same elements appearing in the midst of an even less ponderable landscape. And I do tend to read his poems in terms of landscape: I find myself walking through their lines, not quite comprehending all I see, but not expecting to, overcome with a sensation of, a duty to unfolding contemplation.

I see where some are put off by his "inscrutability" but this is precisely the quality I was most thrilled by in his work: some of us tire of being presented again and again with the easy answers of some liberal

conscience, drowned in simple restatements of "earnest meaning". Ashbery provides a huge vista for being IN the words, for allowing license, for enjoying the derailment of expectations. You come across a line that appears to offer some doorway into an answer, and the next line scoots off into the distance, taking your lunch with it, so you have to follow to where it grows dark, or where a house you've never before seen opens its own windows.

I've read all of him, but this was the first, and seems to hold what I most enjoy about revisiting him: a very modern intelligence in the service of the ambiguous and witty.

Mitch says

Another brilliant Ashbery book. Now he has become trickier, less grandiose, more detailed...still wonderful poems, more mysterious, like who is the I in these poems, and are we the we of the poem?

vi macdonald says

4.5

James says

Lots of gems in here. Love the circularity--"They have so much trouble remembering, when your forgetting/ rescues them at last, as a star absorbs the night" ("The Other Tradition"). And beautiful, dense imagery, coupled with audacious syntax: "'Into the eternal wimpling of the sky: luster / On luster, transparency floated onto the top most layer / Until the whosel thing overflows like a silver / Wedding cake or Christmas tree, in a cascade of tears'" ("Variant"). "Pyrography" is a poem for the American Bicentennial--probably the only commemorative piece worth saving out of that commercialized year of cheese. "What Is Poetry" is a remarkably transparent definition by a notoriously abstract poet. If "The Thief of Poetry" is perhaps a tribute to the enjambment of William Carlos Williams' lines, then "The Ice Cream Wars" may be a nod to Wallace Stevens. It feels like here, the first book after the peak of Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror, that Ashbery is starting the long, slow slide of imitating himself, exaggerating his tics. But why shouldn't he? Virtually every other poet at the end of the twentieth century imitated him too.
