



Digest

Gregory Pardlo

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From Epicurus to Sam Cook, the Daily News to Roots, Digest draws from the present and the past to form an intellectual, American identity. In poems that forge their own styles and strategies, we experience dialogues between the written word and other art forms. Within this dialogue we hear Ben Jonson, we meet police K-9s, and we find children negotiating a sense of the world through a father's eyes and through their own.

Digest Details

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C. Varn says

Pardlo's diversity of reference is actually a little dizzying for such a popular volume of poetry: yet the line this book walks between narrative and personal lyric keeps this volume grounded in an unexpected way. Pardlo's vision of Brooklyn and his own biography ground this book that slips in and out of complicated American identity. Like Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, which is thematically more direct and angry but less autobiographical, this book interrogates Americanness, Otherness, and blackness in ways that can make one feel both comforted and uncomfortable at once. The insight in *Digest* is that it allows for digesting of all those layer complications: interplays between history and pop culture, personal and persona, political and polis, etc, are allowed a space to brew in Pardlo's verse.

This is one of my favorite Pulitzer Prize winning books of poetry, and one that I was not entirely expecting.

Andrea Goldston says

It's perfectly possible that I don't understand something fundamental about poetry, or that I am viewing it too narrowly, but I have read some poetry lately with very many words that required me to have the dictionary on hand to know their meanings and pronunciations. I say this with some frustration because I studied literature in school, and I wonder if I cannot understand this language, who can? PhDs? I don't know. I'm frustrated with writing that renders itself inaccessible to readers with complications. Maybe that's a specific taste thing, but I think writing should be legible by everyone.

This all being said, Pardlo clearly has a great handle on language. This language is deliberate, and the rhythms in the book are interesting and jarring.

Listen, this book has smart poems, but their inaccessibility made them not worth their while, as far as I was concerned.

wade says

A powerful collection of diverse poems which is justly deserving of all the acclaim it has garnered. I especially enjoyed the series of poems that he links together by a common thread. One series of poems, for instance, begins with each one being kick started by a quote by a famous historical personage (St. Augustine, for instance). In fact, Mr. Pardlo's poems are effectively drenched with historical references. I love the way that Pardlo gives deeply of himself in each well constructed verse.

Sara Sams says

Well, it does read as a sort of poetic digest-- which is on the one hand exciting and far-reaching; on the other hand, I find myself clinging to the strongest voices in the book and wanting more of each. Thus is my pesky

desire for story, for connection.

There are some stunners, for sure: "Occam" in "The Conatus Improvisations" & "Wishing Well" & "Raisin..." (I see a pattern in my preferences-- the poems of closer and therefore more tender moments). I have a feeling this book would expand for me with time, which it definitely asks of you in each successive line.

Some of Pardlo's smart and bone-deep imagery:

"...but at year's end my innocence dislodged/ like a powdered wig as I witnessed the first installment/ of Roots" (37, "Philadelphia Negro").

"That oppressive fruit dropped heavy as a medicine/ ball in my lap meant to check my ego..." (35, "Raisin")

"If every line is a horizon, what when/ I have two? One stratus, moody as the treble/ string on a lute" (62, "Bipolar")

Eric says

I took my time reading this. I believe one reads poetry differently than literary fiction or prose. Pardlo's sense of history is strong and I found those poems in which he evokes history the most powerful. I admit this as my bias as a historian. The book exhibits Pardlo's range as a poet writing comfortably with allusions to African-American history and culture as well as drawing from Hegel and Kierkegaard. One other aspect I appreciate about some of these poems are references to Pardlo's personal history. It engenders empathy toward the poet himself. I'll be revisiting some of these poems.

Peter Landau says

Gregory Pardlo offers a kaleidoscope of daddy issues in DIGEST. But there's more. He has a beautiful, dare I say poetic, way with language that mixes high and low culture with ease and insight. But he isn't abstract. His poems are rooted in place, whether that be Brooklyn, Atlantic City or outside the Met. But he's also cerebral in the best way, in dialogue with his relations, his history and his intellectual ancestors. In that sense, Pardlo is part of a great lineage. Like those giants on whose shoulders he stands, his work deepens with repeated reads, and maybe even gives readers a lift to that rare view of compassion.

Jee Koh says

Intellectually challenging, the volume gives no quarter to the reader not up to scratch on Western philosophy, African American history, and popular culture. The music of the poems very often carries me through seas of incomprehension. It is a wry, knowing, and, yes, tragic voice. The last because it understands the situation of loneliness. Despite family, communal, and intellectual ties, the speaker feels his loneliness in the marrow. He makes me feel again mine.

Rita Reese says

I loved this book. Will definitely read it again.

Abby says

"You are stranded
at the limit, extremity and restriction,
jealous for that elusive—the domestic, yes,
you're thinking: not the brick and mortar, but
the quickening backfill of belonging, the stranger-
facing, the neighbor-knowing confidence and ease
with the ripple that diminishes as it extends
over the vast potential of immovable thirst."

— Selection from "Marginalia"

Cheryl Gatling says

The thing that made me pick this book off the shelf was the blurb on the back that promised "engaged, intelligent poetry, with its exuberant range of cultural and historical references." Good, I thought. I like writing that is smart, and that makes me think.

In that, Pardlo delivers as advertised. There are references to Sojourner Truth, Frederick Law Olmstead, Gouverneur Morris (one of the Founding Fathers), Spinoza, Abraham from the Bible, Robert Johnson, Gauguin, Chinua Achebe, and that is only in the first ten pages. And all of this was in the description of a multicultural Brooklyn with picknickers, handball players, fireworks, door to door evangelists, and grocery shoppers.

Some of the poems only made sense after I Googled a few things. "Four Improvisations on Ursa Corregidora" takes off on the work of Gayl Jones, a novelist with whom I was unfamiliar.

"Alienation Effects" is written in the voice of philosopher Louis Althusser, who killed his wife. He explains himself, or fails to do so. In a surprise twist, he addresses the author: "I can't deliver you, Pardlo."

"The Conatus Improvisations" are a series of poems, each beginning with a quote from a philosopher, and each about cars. "Conatus" I looked up. It is the tendency of a thing to continue itself. In this case it seems to be saying that cars have taken on a life of their own, and made us serve them.

But it is not as simple as that. There is philosophy here, but this is not philosophy. It is poetry. There are vivid images, sometimes whimsical (the overheated car like a beached whale "pouring steam from its blowhole," legs of mechanics dangling from the upraised hoods of cars being worked on "like tailfins draping a pelican's beak," "knots of cars strung in rows like Incan quipu"). And there is precise language,

ticking along in packed sentences, swinging from the erudite to the slangy.

Other poems I enjoyed were a fake college course outline, and a fake book blurb, which were almost laugh out loud funny, in their spoof of the overblown language of academe.

Kristin says

Wow! I cannot wait to teach this one!

Joanna says

If you're looking for poetry you can read through on the first try and "get it", then this is not a book for you. If you don't want to spend time with your poems, staring into each other's eyes and discovering new features and shades over the course of days and days, then this not a book for you. Pardlo's poems are dense, complex, and full of meaning that one must sit with for extended periods of time to mine. It is well worth the effort, and I know I will keep coming back to this book over and over again.

Ash Ponders says

Astonished and a perhaps a bit ashamed I did not love this. I found little to inhabit, moments though obviously authentic, slipped by as alien as ever.

Brina says

My personal Pulitzer reading challenge continues with the 2015 winner for poetry, *Digest* by Gregory Pardlo. A gifted poet based out of Brooklyn and teaching undergraduate writing at Columbia University, Pardlo is a gem of a writer who should not be overlooked when discussing contemporary poetry. His work has been praised as including "images that glimmer" by current poet laureate Tracy K. Smith and is an ambitious cross-section of modern poetry and couplets, and is a treat to read for literary fiction aficionados.

Pardlo writes about what is familiar to him and as he hails from Brooklyn, his poems are a chock full of references to the people and neighborhoods that call the borough home. In his Preamble to the four part poem *Marginalia*, Pardlo describes a typical neighborhood in Prospect Park. One can hear "the human retinue converging on the uneven playing fields. The African drum and dance circle sways the pignut tree into a charismatic trance..." and imagery so vibrant that one feels as though he is instantly transported to Brooklyn on a summer afternoon. In the same *Marginalia*, Pardlo describes the hustle and bustle of Brooklyn as residents prepare for July 4th and strikes an intriguing between his own life, the daily grind of Brooklyn, and social commentary of the time. As this is a contemporary volume, I appreciated the references to tennis star Venus Williams as well as current Hollywood celebrities. *Marginalia* could easily be the centerpiece of this volume, yet the stellar poem comes near the beginning, with more literary joys to follow.

Other poems which I enjoyed in this collection included "For Which it Stands." Pardlo discusses what the

American flag symbolizes for African Americans today and includes a history lesson as well as his own social commentary. He writes of a family trip to Central America where he decides to change the family's car for a rental near Atlanta so that Southerners would not see their "Yankee license plates." Pardlo references fictional character Apollo Creed boxing for his country and cites his forebears trailblazing in the south to pave the way for increased civil rights today. While Pardlo is still apprehensive of the south, he still lauds the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance, stating that, "I approve its message, its pledge to birth a nation of belonging and to teach that nation of the fire shut up in our bones."

Another poem that touched me was "Wishing Well" take describes Central Park and other sites in Manhattan during autumn. With vivid imagery, Pardlo sums up his sentiments about life as a New Yorker and makes a reader wish that they could be present in the pages. In addition to his work describing life in New York, Pardlo appears to be a savvy traveler as well because he writes poems that are musings about Copenhagen, Atlantic City, and Central America. In each instance, readers encounter people who make up the fabric of the human existence, and all of the words seem so real as though one is there. Each poem is more masterful than the next, leaving me awed by the time I completed this collection.

Gregory Pardlo is a leading contemporary American poet. His first collection Totem won the American Poetry Review Prize. Digest is a chock full of rich imagery and a pure joy to read and makes one appreciate that writing poetry is as time consuming as writing a lengthy novel. Pardlo's work is worthy of its accolades and I eagerly anticipate when he produces another acclaimed collection of his work.

William Owen says

I thought two things when I heard about this book - damn, why has this been out for a year and I haven't caught wind of it yet - and two, well duh, of course this won the Pulitzer.

I saw Gregory read the first time about eight years ago at the Poetry Project. After his reading I started a poetry reading review site I was so impressed by the work. I've had the chance to see him read one other time since then, and I've considered him the finest reader of poetry I've encountered in my time. I've looked now and again, once or twice a year, for a new work from him to surface.

He has not disappointed with this collection, and I am quite happy to know I now will have far more company looking, now and again, for his future endeavors.
